WESTERN

Story Annual

1945

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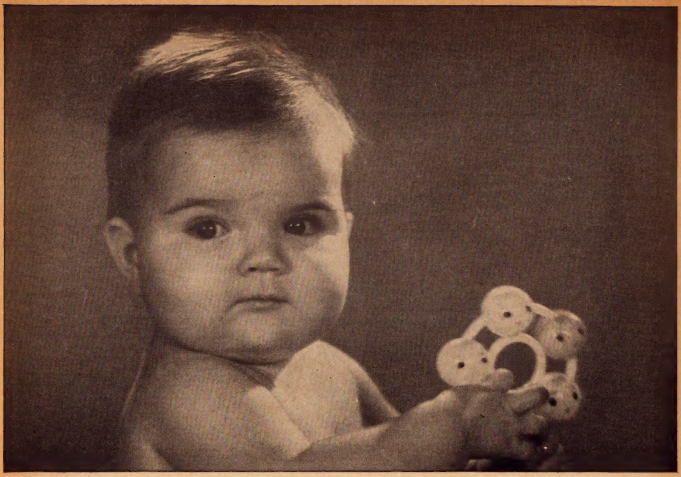

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— CLASS OF '63

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN Story Annual

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All stories in this Annual are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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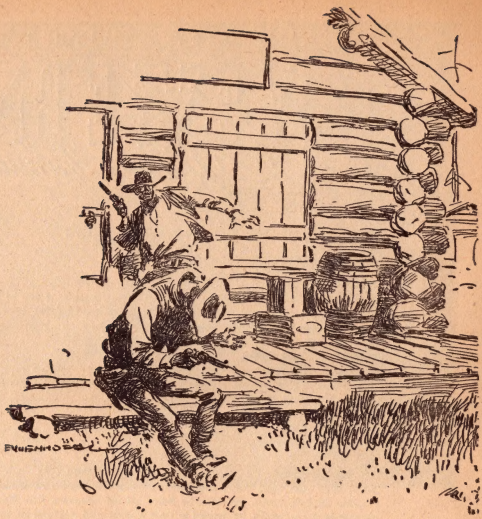


LIGHTNIN' BRANDED

by Walt Coburn

I.

Aunt Mattie Moran reminded herself of the old saying that lightning never strikes twice in the same place. But she had watched it, just now, strike in two places at the same time. And that would be one to tell Mort and the boys when she rode back through the Red Pass into the Big Hole.

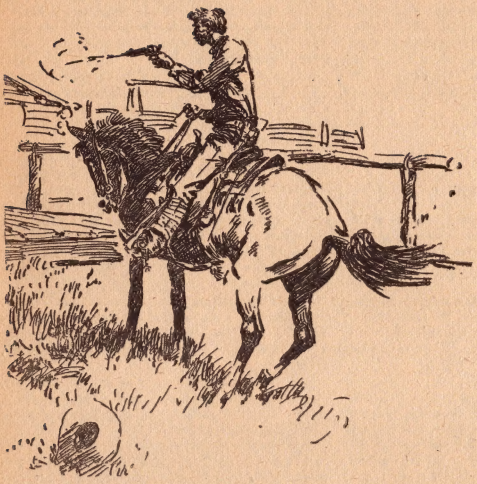
Aunt Mattie had been on guard here all night, all through the first black wind, and then the heavy rain, and she had shivered in her chaps and slicker when the thunder rolled across the badlands and crashed into the thousand-foot cliffs of the Red Pass. The lightning had flashed and crackled as though it were splitting the earth in two.

Then just now Aunt Mattie had watched one bolt of chain lightning split like the forked tongue of a snake. The two jagged prongs had struck the earth down there in the Red Pass, not half a mile away. The woman could smell burned sulphur, and there was a brassy taste in her mouth. And down below in the black drizzle she saw an old dead pine blazing where one of the prongs of lightning had struck.

Aunt Mattie was a woman of courage. A woman needed courage to be the wife of an outlaw. There were times when she had to do jobs and take chances that would stop a lot of men who weren't cowards.

The cold rain had penetrated her slicker, wetting

Badge toters never left the Big Hole except for a one-way passar to Boothill, yet Dave Carver dared enter that renegade empire with the law's brand burned into his hide



the cowpuncher clothes she wore, and that lightning-struck pine was giving off a hot blaze that overrode her caution. She got on her horse and rode down the steep twisting trail toward the fire.

Mattie Moran was as tall as the average man, with straight, gray-streaked black hair, and bold, clean-cut features. Her eyes were the gray-black color of smoke, and set under heavy black brows. A handsome woman who could ride and shoot and handle cattle and horses like a cowhand, she was called Aunt Mattie by the outlaws who drifted in and out of the Big Hole, and who showed her more respect than most women get. Mattie's word was the only law in the Big Hole. Even her whiskey-loving husband, with a big price on his head, thought twice before he crossed her or interfered with her plans.

The blaze from the lightning-struck pine lighted up the big boulders and patches of brush and the scrub pines, and threw a reddish glint on the deep, swift river below.

But Aunt Mattie Moran was not looking at the scenery. She was staring, her six-shooter gripped in her hand, at the two men who lay on the ground not fifty feet apart, and at the two dead saddled horses. The lightning had struck twice. And it looked as though it had killed two men and two horses.

Then one of the men moved slowly, as though he was hurt or dazed, or both. Aunt Mattie Moran rode over and looked down at him, her gun pointed at his middle.

He was in bad shape. Almost as bad a shape as the other man, whose face was black and whose open eyes were glazed with death. Both horses and both men had been struck by lightning. Two horses and one man had been killed. This man was alive. Partly alive, anyhow.

His thick, straw-colored hair had been singed. Parts of his clothes had been burned. There was a dazed, bewildered look in his gray-blue eyes.

Mattie Moran shoved her six-shooter back into its holster. Stepping off her horse, she knelt on one

knee beside the man. He managed a stiff-lipped grin.

"You'll come around directly," she said. "Who are you, anyhow? And who's your pardner?"

She had fetched along a pint of Mort Moran's whiskey, and now she made him take two or three big swallows. He drank the fiery corn whiskey as though it was creek water, but it brought the color back into his gray cheeks, and his eyes lost something of their dullness.

"Mebbeso," he said slowly, "it'll come to me directly. But right now I don't know who I am, where I come from, or where I am."

"You've been struck by lightnin'," Mattie told him.

Feeling for his heartbeat, her groping hand found a metal badge pinned to his undershirt on the inside. There were some papers and a brand tally book, too. When the man lay back to close his eyes against the pain that must have seemed to be splitting his skull apart, Mattie shoved the law badge, tally book and papers into the pocket of her chaps.

Getting up, she examined the dead man, then the brands on the two horses, and the makes of the two saddles. She came back and picked a six-shooter from the ground where it lay beside the dazed man.

"You were struck by lightnin', mister," she said brusquely. "And mebbeso the other gent was, likewise. But there's a bullet hole between his eyes and six empty shells in your six-shooter. His name is Dave Carver, and he was on his way to the Big Hole. Now quit playin' possum or I'll take a jackknife and commence whittling some truth out of you. Who are you, mister? You look enough like Dave Carver to be his twin brother. I'm Mattie Moran and I'm talkin' turkey. Turn over your hole card, Mr. Dick."

"Dick?"

"Yeah. Dick. City name for a detective. I've got your badge and a bench warrant you packed for Dave Carver. You must have killed him just about the time the lightnin' forked and struck you both. Now you'd better commence to remember."

The lightning-struck man sat up slowly. Aunt Mattie fed him another couple of drinks.

"My head shore aches," he told her. "You kin whittle on me till your barlow knife gits dull, but that's not goin' to help either of us. I don't know who I am. I never heard of Dave Carver. I never heard of anybody named Mattie Moran. Now if you think it'll do some good, commence whittlin', lady."

Mattie shoved her face close to his, so that their eyes were not more than twelve inches apart. She could read the truth in the lightning-struck cowpuncher's eyes. Then she sat back on her boot heels, a faint smile on her tanned face, her gray-black eyes glinting. She had the puncher's six-shooter in her hand.

"All right, mister," she said. "We start from scratch. And I'm doing all the winning. You'll do what I say or you'll be deader than that lightnin'-struck gent yonder with a hole between his eyes. Your name is Dave Carver. And that's all you do know. Otherwise—"

Mattie Moran cocked the long-barreled .45.

The cowpuncher man looked at the woman, then at the gun pointed at him. His wide mouth grinned faintly.

"I'm Dave Carver."

She nodded and let the hammer down on the gun. She used her saddle horse and catch rope to drag the dead man and one of the dead horses to the brink of the river that roared far below. While the blaze from the lightning-blasted pine threw an eerie light over the scene, Aunt Mattie Moran dumped the dead horse and outlaw over the rocky ledge, and watched them disappear in the black torrent below.

"I've been waiting for you since last evenin', Dave Carver," she smiled at the puncher. "With a Winchester. I aimed to kill you. This changes it. This changes a lot of things at the Big Hole. Savvy, *Dave Carver?*"

But the lightning-struck man did not hear her, did not see her. His eyes, glazed as a blind man's, were staring. With a sound that was something like a moan, he lay back.

Then Mattie Moran saw that his right hand was as black as if he had shoved it into a fire. The soles of his boots were burned off, and his feet were marked where the nails from the boots had touched. There was a burn on his thigh where his jackknife had been in his pocket, burns where the metal suspender buttons of his overalls were. And on his left chest where the badge had been pinned to his undershirt was an ugly red burn. By some freakish prank of the lightning bolt the metal had burned the man's flesh wherever it had touched. His gun hand had been burned the worst. Lucky for him that he had buckled his filled cartridge belt around his saddle cantle. Every cartridge had exploded.

By the light of the burning pine tree, Mattie carefully examined the exploded cartridges in the six-shooter. Only one cartridge cap showed the deep indentation of the gun hammer. Lightning had exploded every cartridge but one. That one had been fired. Its bullet had struck the real Dave Carver square between the eyes.

The rain was beginning to let up, and a half-moon pushed its way through broken graying clouds as the stars paled in the dawn. Mattie Moran

tied the unconscious lightning-struck man on her horse and led the animal through the big, narrow, red-rock cliffs of Red Pass. She emptied her six-shooter at the morning star, counting audibly to ten between each shot, and a few minutes later a couple of heavily armed riders came up out of the dawn.

"Bust up that stud game Mort is running, one of you boys," ordered Aunt Mattie Moran. "Tell Mort that Dave Carver is on his way. He's not drunk, misters, and he's not dead—yet. He was lightnin' struck. Horse killed from under him."

"But you went to bed early, Aunt Mattie!" one of the men exclaimed. "How—where—how come you—"

"I like storms," Mattie cut in brusquely. "Thunder and lightnin'. Like young Mandy gets moon-struck of a soft moonlight night and rides off through the Red Pass onto the Long Mesa by herself. Maybe I was moonstruck when I was sixteen, then after I married Mort the moon business lost its tang and I got to like the sound of lightnin' and thunder. You wouldn't savvy, because you've never been in love. Now, one of you lope along and break the big news to Mort. He's been expectin' Dave Carver for a week."

There was a faint smile on Mattie Moran's face, but her smoke-colored eyes were dark and the color of her skin was grayish in the early dawn.

II.

"Take 'er easy, cowboy. Easy does the trick. You'd better not try to talk, Dave Carver. You were struck by lightnin' and you've been batty as a locoed sheepherder for a couple of days and nights. Drink this. It's milk. Milk with eggs and some whiskey in it. Eggnog, Dave Carver."

Aunt Mattie Moran sat beside the bunk, there in the whitewashed log cabin. Her eyes kept watching the eyes of the sick man as she talked soothingly to him.

"Dave . . . Dave Carver—" The man's voice was a croaking whisper.

"Remember?" Mattie's voice was low-toned.

"Who am I? Where am I? How did I git here?"

"Lie back and take it easy, Dave Carver. Drink this. You need something to give you strength."

The man's eyes slid past her and toward the girl who had come into the log cabin.

She was a tall, lithe girl with the same black hair and gray-black smoke-colored eyes as the woman. But her features were more finely chiseled, her mouth softer.

"My daughter Mandy Moran," said Mattie. "Wearing her new red-checkered dress. Mostly she wears cowpuncher duds. I think Dave Carver is coming out of it, Mandy. We'll change the poultices on his feet and his hand."

"I won fifty dollars off Shorty and the Turkey Track Kid shooting at the swinging target, Mattie," announced the girl.

"They let you win," her mother said, smiling faintly, "and paid you off with money that came from that U. P. train holdup. That money is so much Confederate until it's passed in the big towns. Don't try to spend any of it at Culpepper's store on the Long Mesa. Ike Culpepper is a skinflint and a blackguard, and he knows that I know it. Where'd you get the high-heeled red slippers?"

"Curly Bob brought 'em," Mandy explained.

"Listen baby you're five years too young to be wearing dance-hall-gal slippers. Go back to those Sioux moccasins. Injun moccasins might make you a little squaw-footed, but they're honest. Which is more than I can say for Curly Bob. Now shed those red slippers, child."

A tall rawboned man with iron-gray hair and drooping mustache came in, stooping to get through the six-foot door. His hard, bleak gray eyes were a little bloodshot and he had a grin on his lean, tanned whiskey-flushed face.

"What's the rip?" he demanded. "Carver come out of it yet?"

The lightning-struck man tried to grin. There was no sign of recognition in his eyes.

"Don't you remember Mort, Dave Carver?" asked Aunt Mattie. Her eyes watched the sick man narrowly.

"When I git to recollectin' my own name," he said slowly, "then mebbeso I'll place Mort. You're right. Moccasins beats them honkatonk slippers, ma'am. She's lackin' in age."

Mort Moran grinned crookedly. "That shore sounds comical, comin' from Dave Carver. Take 'em off, kid, if Dave says so. He might be lightnin' struck, but he's the ramrod here at the Big Hole. Where'd you cache the dinero from the Kansas City job, Dave? Remember?"

"Dave Carver," said Aunt Mattie flatly, "don't even remember his own name. Why don't you get back to your poker game, Mort? And if you don't put Curly Bob where he belongs, I'll bend a gun across that purty head of his. Let's get the poultices fixed, Mandy."

Mandy Moran took off her high-heeled red slippers and handed them to her mother.

"I'll ask for 'em on my twenty-first birthday, Mattie," she smiled. "They fit too late, anyhow. Whoever Curly Bob stole 'em from must have feet like a Missouri mule. Seems to me it's time we shaved Dave Carver out from behind the brush patch."

Other men came in, said something, went out of

the cabin when Aunt Mattie Moran turned her scowl on them. They were the outlaws hiding out right now at the Big Hole. Hunted men. Riders of the Outlaw Trail. Tough gun toters with prices on their heads. They all wanted to say something or shake hands with the lightning-struck man on the bunk. For them all Aunt Mattie Moran had the same curt answer.

"Dave Carver is a sick man. He can't shake hands because his gun hand is lightnin' burned. Travel out, boys. This cabin's the Big Hole hospital."

Mandy now wore a pair of beaded moccasins. She moved around the cabin quickly and without a sound, carrying out the orders her mother gave in her deep contralto voice. When the wet poultice bandages had been changed on the injured man's feet and hand, Aunt Mattie sent the girl out for something. Then she put a dry dressing on the peculiarly shaped burn on the left side of the man's chest.

"You've seen most of the gang," she said in a low voice. "Now can you remember who you are? Where you are? Why you came here?"

The lightning-struck man grinned faintly and shook his head. His eyes, blue-gray, unflinching, met the woman's hard scrutiny.

"I reckon," he said slowly, "I must be a feller named Dave Carver."

Aunt Mattie Moran nodded. "Dave Carver. Leader of the Carver Gang. You got eighty thousand dollars from that Kansas City bank robbery. You came here to hide out. The boys in your gang will be riding in here in a month or two for their split. Mort Moran always acts as banker. That's all of the story, Dave Carver—except that you made a dicker with Mort to marry our daughter Mandy. You were buying her like a young buck Injun buys a squaw.

"The dicker," Aunt Mattie Moran finished, her voice brittle, "was made six months ago when you and your gang stopped here at the Big Hole over night. You were all drinking. Playing poker. Mort was drunker than usual, and you took him to a cleaning. You caught a glimpse of Mandy. To square his poker debt and to keep from being killed, Mort Moran sold his daughter. You did the buying. Fifty thousand dollars in cash. Remember?"

The lightning-struck man lay back on his pillow. There was a bitter twist to his square-cornered mouth, and his eyes were as hard as ice.

"Yes, he said, "I remember."

His voice fell flatly on the silence as Mandy Moran came into the cabin. Her moccasined feet made no sound. She might have been standing outside the door, there in the dusk, listening.

"Let's shave the whiskers off his face, Mattie," the girl said, "and see what Dave Carver looks like."

Mandy Moran was smiling, but there was a smoldering fire of resentment and hatred in her smoke-gray eyes.

"Better forget about the shavin'," the puncher grinned stiffly, "till I kin handle my own razor."

"Scared I might let the razor slip and cut your throat, mister?" the girl taunted him.

"We might let it go at that," he told her.

Aunt Mattie's laugh sounded a little forced.

"There's no hurry about this shaving," she said.

III.

Mattie Moran told the lightning-struck man to keep his shirt and undershirt buttoned, always. That if Mort or Shorty or the Turkey Track Kid or Curly Bob ever saw that badge-shaped burn on his chest, there might be a killing.

His feet got healed enough so that he could wear boots and get around. His right hand was healing stubbornly, and he kept working his wrist and fingers to get the stiffness and numbness out. He figured he might need his gun hand almost any time. Because Curly Bob didn't like him.

"Let me know when you git to feelin' lucky, Carver," Curly Bob said. "I want to tell you what I think of a squaw man."

That's what they were calling him when they talked about Dave Carver and how he had made a dicker to buy Mandy Moran from her father. The squaw man. Most squaw men buy their Indian wives.

Curly Bob was in love with Mandy, and made no effort to conceal his feelings. Perhaps the girl was in love with Curly Bob. But if she was in love with him or any other man she hid her emotions behind a tomboy front that kept even the swaggering Curly Bob at a safe distance.

Curly Bob was tall and well built, with wide shoulders and lean flanks. He was the best bronc rider and roper in that part of the country. He had thick, black, curly hair, and a pair of hard yellow eyes that were set under heavy black brows on either side of a hawk-beaked nose.

Curly Bob came and went at irregular intervals. He worked for Ike Culpepper, buying and selling cattle, and a lot of his time was spent at the Culpepper ranch on Black River, where the cattle were delivered and branded, and small herds shaped for the trail across the Wyoming border into Montana where they were delivered to ranchers.

Big cow outfits were quarreling and fighting over water rights and range boundaries. And while they quarreled, the outlaw cowpunchers who hid out in places like the Big Hole and Little Hole and the

badlands country of Long Mesa were doing a good job of cattle rustling.

Ike Culpepper lived at his store on the Long Mesa. A short, blocky man who joshed and talked a lot and managed to say nothing. His grin was meaningless. He could laugh with a smoking gun in his hand, while the bloodshot green eyes watched a dying man go out. The expression in Ike Culpepper's eyes never changed. Rumor had it that he had once been a schoolteacher in Utah.

At Ike Culpepper's store you could buy anything, from a spool of black thread to a secondhand Winchester, a slab of bacon or a gallon of corn whiskey.

Culpepper paid anywhere from five to ten dollars a head for stolen cattle, the price depending on the critter, the rustler, and the job of brand changing on the cow brute's hide. Cattle had to be delivered at his Black River Ranch. There they were turned loose and grazed until the worked brand haired over. Then Curly Bob and his picked crew of fighting cowhands would shape up a trail herd and drift them into Montana.

Ike Culpepper drove a hard, merciless bargain at any sort of dicker or trade. Curly Bob ramrodded his outfit. They were a hard pair to beat.

Years ago Ike Culpepper and Mort Moran had fought a battle that had lasted a week, there in the rough, broken badlands strip of country that was the stamping ground for all manner of hunted men. They had fought at long range, their carbine sights raised to the last notch, dodging in and out of canyons and cut coulees, taking shots at each other when one of them skylighted himself. It was a deadly game of gun tag that went on, night and day, for a week, until both of them, exhausted, hungry, wounded in several places and weak from loss of blood, had been forced to quit. More dead than alive, their ammunition exhausted, they had ridden into the tough little cow town of Pinto Point for cartridges and whiskey, and to get some .30-30 slugs cut out of their tough hides. Slipping into town at night, they had met one another on the street. There they had fought with hands and feet and teeth until the men who finally pried them apart thought they were separating two dead men.

They had fought over a cow woman called Mattie. She had nursed both of them back to life there at Pinto Point, and made them cut cards to see who would marry her. Mort Moran had cut the high card. Mattie, who had no other name, had married Mort Moran and they had moved to the Big Hole to live. That had been the way of it. The two men had never met since then. Mort Moran stayed in the Big Hole. Ike Culpepper lived at his store or at his ranch on Black River. They were still the two bitterest enemies in the cow country, but Mattie had made them promise never to pick up their unfinished gun battle. She forced them to keep their words.

Whiskey and gambling were getting the best of Mort Moran, and it was typical of Mattie that she made no move to stop his drinking or card playing.

Lately, too, it was being rumored that Ike Culpepper was going loco, that the man's mind was getting slowly poisoned by hate and brooding and bitterness, that he had been seen riding across the Long Mesa at night, talking to himself, his deep-chested laughter cracking apart in a maniacal scream. He would show up at daybreak at his store or at the Black River Ranch, his horse played out, his heavy face gray as lead, and Curly Bob would take care of him, hiding him where men could not get a look at him until his mind cleared and he was himself again.

They said that on those nights when Ike Culpepper rode the Long Mesa, shooting at rocks and tree stumps or at anything that moved, Curly Bob would cold-trail him, taking good care to keep out of gun range. It was rumored that on two different occasions Curly Bob had been sighted by the night-riding madman, and had been nicked by his .30-30 bullets.

Nobody knew what the bond of friendship between the two men was, unless Curly Bob was Ike Culpepper's son by a marriage that belonged back in Utah, where the man's name had been something else besides Culpepper, and where he had taught a Morman school.

Neither of the men ever talked about the other. Curly Bob had ridden up out of nowhere one night and stopped at Ike Culpepper's store on the Long Mesa. That was ten years or more ago. From that night on, Curly Bob had been Culpepper's right-hand bower.

Asking questions is an unhealthy habit in an outlaw badlands country. The partnership of Ike Culpepper and Curly Bob was just another mystery that might or might not some day be cleared up.

Meanwhile the outlaws at the Big Hole, cowpunchers on the dodge, men like Shorty and the Turkey Track Kid, rustled cattle from the warring cow outfits. They got drunk, gambled, went broke, and rode out again to steal more cattle. And in between times they talked of joining some outlaw gang like the Wild Bunch or Dave Carver's gang.

Now they were eyeing the lightning-struck man with something in between fear and distrust. They told one another that Dave Carver had ridden back to the Big Hole to claim his bride, but now his mind was a blank, and he did not remember what had become of the eighty thousand dollars he and his four outlaws had gotten from the Kansas City bank robbery.

Curly Bob, in love with Mandy Moran, was calling Dave Carver a squaw man and making fight

talk. The lightning-struck man kept to himself. He practiced shooting with his left hand and did a mighty fast and accurate job of it. Often of a night he rode out of the Big Hole with Aunt Mattie on mysterious journeys that fetched them back at dawn, their horses leg weary and sweat marked.

Now and then Mandy Moran would talk to the lightning-struck cowpuncher. Her smile would be genuine and the smoldering resentment would vanish from her gray-black eyes. They would shoot at the swinging target, a tin can hung by a leather string from a tree limb. The first bullet that struck the can would start it spinning and swinging. The game was to put six bullets in the can in the shortest possible time.

Meanwhile, Mort Moran was getting ugly. He was drinking more heavily than ever, and he kept asking the lightning-struck man when he was going to remember what he had done with that eighty thousand dollars. What had become of the other members of his gang? They had not shown up at any of the hideouts along the Outlaw Trail, nor had word from any of them been picked up at the secret "post offices" on the Outlaw Trail.

"There's somethin' almighty mysterious about this whole thing that I don't like, Carver," Mort declared. "You shore act and talk different than you did that night you come here six months ago. You was plenty *bravo* then. Plenty *muy valiente*. Now you talk and act like a man who's lost his guts. When are you goin' to gut-shoot Curly Bob, pay me my money, and claim your bride? I aim to keep my end of the deal. I seen you put six bullet holes in that swingin' can, shootin' left-handed. That makes Curly Bob's shootin' look like a sheepherder's. Are you scairt of Curly Bob and Ike Culpepper?"

"Let him alone, Mort."

Mattie had come up. Her voice was flat-toned, deadly. Mort Moran's face flushed and his bloodshot eyes congested. He turned and walked away.

"Take it easy, Dave Carver," Mattie told the puncher. "We wait till the sign is right. Mort's drunk. Don't let him bother you."

"I don't aim to let anybody bother me, Mattie," he said quietly. "I'm not ready yet."

"Take Mandy for a ride up on the Long Mesa. Nobody will meet you. Curly Bob is at the Black River Ranch. The boys are gathering cattle. But don't go near Ike Culpepper's store. He's one man whose eyes could see plumb through your shirt and undershirt and read that law badge burned on your chest. Now take Mandy riding. Talk to her. Get her talking. Make her like you."

"I'm doin' my best," he grinned faintly. "She still hates me."

"She hates Dave Carver. You can't blame the kid. She's not a squaw. It's the squaw buyer Dave Carver she hates."

"I'm not so certain about that. Why don't she hate her father who sold her?"

"Because," said Aunt Mattie, smiling faintly, "she knows that Mort never did intend keeping his bargain. That he aimed to doublecross Dave Carver, right from the start. That if you had that money and laid it on the barrel head, you'd be signing your death warrant. Mort Moran, whiskey soaked or not, is fast with a gun—and he packs two sneak guns. Anyway, he knows that if he did miss or was too slow, Curly Bob would finish dealing his cards. So, mister, Mandy knows that Mort Moran isn't selling his daughter like an Injun sells his squaw daughter to the highest-bidding squaw man. Mandy's just a sixteen-year-old kid, but she's not slow-witted, mister."

"That's what I'm drivin' at. I have a hunch she got a look at that lightnin'-burned law badge on my hide."

"You think she knows you're not Dave Carver?"

"Somethin' like that." The lightning-struck cowpuncher's grin was twisted. "But did it ever occur to you that I might be Dave Carver? That I'd killed the range detective that owned the badge? That it was Dave Carver wearin' the law badge pinned to his undershirt, packin' his own bench warrant? Think that one over careful, Mattie."

As he turned and walked away from her, Mandy came riding up to the corral where they had been standing.

"If you ain't scared or ashamed to be caught ridin' with the squaw man, Mandy, I'll ride up onto the Long Mesa with you," he drawled.

"Rattle your hocks then, Lightnin'." Mandy gave him a quick smile.

He liked the nickname—Lightnin'. Mandy Moran had begun calling him that. The others had picked it up, and even Curly Bob and Mort called him Lightnin' sometimes when they talked to him.

Aunt Mattie's almost too heavy black brows pulled into a scowl as she watched him saddle his horse. The man's words had started a train of thought that was not altogether new. She suspected that he was remembering a lot more about his past than he was admitting, and she wondered if he was playing a game that would leave her the loser. Supposing he was really Dave Carver. That he was actually planning to claim Mandy. That he was playing her, Mattie, for a fool.

Aunt Mattie's right hand was brushing the carved ivory handle of the six-shooter she wore in a holster that hung from a filled cartridge belt at the exact distance to be within reach of her hand when her arm was slightly bent at the elbow.

"Take it easy, Mattie," said Mandy, her voice

Aunt Mattie kept watching the lightning-struck man and talking soothingly to him but when he finally opened his eyes they clung to the tall, gray-eyed girl who stood at the foot of the bed.

toned low. "Let's wait till we turn up his hole card. Anyhow, you might hit the horse." She spoke the last sentence in a loud-enough tone to reach the man's ears.

Lightnin' jerked the latigo tight to cinch his saddle on the big gelding he was going to ride. He grinned over his shoulder, and there was a new light in his gray-blue eyes that crinkled at the corners.

"And you'd shore grieve some, Aunt Mattie, if you shot a horse."

Aunt Mattie Moran's hand came away from her gun. Lightnin' swung aboard his horse and rode up alongside Mandy. The laughter was still in his eyes, but it died slowly with his next words.

"When I remember it all and git it braided together like a Mexican makes a rawhide reata," he said, "I'll let you know Mattie. And I'll tell Mandy. Right now, that reata is only half braided. But when it's done, I'll hand it to you, Mattie. Even if you have to drop the loop over my head and hang me from a tree limb. The fire left the trunk and one low limb on that pine tree, the night the lightnin' struck. It'd make a good hangin' tree, and you'll be welcome to string me up there if I hurt you or Mandy in any way. So just keep on callin' me Lightnin'. And keep on rememberin' this: That no matter who I was or what I was before that lightnin' struck that night, I'd kill the man that tried to hurt either of you. If you can't believe that, Aunt Mattie, you'd better use that gun on me right now."

The hard glint in Aunt Mattie Moran's eyes died. "You're a white man," she said. "If I hadn't been certain of it that night, you'd never have reached the Big Hole. Mandy's my baby. Take good care of her, regardless, Lightnin'."

Their eyes met and held like the strong grip of a hand shake that binds a solemn promise.

Aunt Mattie Moran's eyes were misted and as she watched them ride away there was a smile on her face that erased the hard lines around the corners of her mouth and eyes, and made her as beautiful as the girl who was her daughter.

Lightnin', twisting in his saddle, his weight in his left stirrup, lifted his hat. It might have been a sort of salute. A wild cowhand's salute to a lady of courage.

"I could darn near kiss you for that, Lightnin'," said Mandy huskily.

"You don't need to bawl about it. Might be, I'll take you up some time on that promise. And you'd claw like a wildcat. Now show me the shortest trail to Ike Culpepper's store on the Long Mesa."

IV.

The Long Mesa was a strip of high, flat bench land covered with scrub timber and patches of

brush. The trail rimmed steeply up out of the Big Hole to the top of the mesa. At the other end of the twenty-five-mile stretch of timbered bench land was the rocky slant that led down to the Black River badlands and Culpepper's ranch. The store was out in the wide middle of the Long Mesa.

Lightnin' had ridden across it at night with Mattie while she showed him the twisting trails, the getaway trail leading off the Long Mesa into the broken badlands country on all sides. A score of trails led to as many hide-outs in the roughest strip of country a hunted man could wish to find. There was an untamed grandeur about this badlands country that quickened a man's pulse and made him feel free. No law officer dared ride into this strip of outlaw territory and hope to live to brag about it.

Mandy Moran hesitated about riding across Long Mesa after they had climbed the steep trail to the top.

"Mattie don't want you to go near Ike Culpepper's store," she told Lightnin'. "I heard my mother warn you."

Lightnin' nodded. "Things are gettin' kind o' tight for this lightnin'-struck cowhand. Before they close in any tighter I've got to meet Ike Culpepper face to face. He'll know the answer to somethin' I've got to find out."

"Hasn't Mattie shown you the short trail to Culpepper's store?"

"No. Other trails. Not that one. Till now I haven't bin ready to ride that trail. Now, this evenin', the sign is right. You show me the trail, then turn back."

"I'm going with you to the store or you don't go at all."

"There might be some shootin', Mandy."

"And I want to watch it. I was hardly big enough to walk when I saw a man shot. Since then there have been others. I'm not gun shy."

The girl's tone hardened so that it sounded like Mattie speaking. When Lightnin' looked at her he saw the same firm set to her mouth, the same darkening of smoke-gray eyes that made her like her mother.

"No, I don't reckon you're exactly gun shy. And while it wasn't planned thataway, you might as well come along. If I git killed, you kin fetch the news back to Mattie."

"I wish I knew just what this game is that you and Mattie are playing. Has she got that eighty thousand dollars from the Kansas City bank holdup?"

"Now," he grinned, "you're askin' me one I shore don't know the answer to. And I don't know what her game is."

"She wants to get me out of the Big Hole," said Mandy. "I know that."

"What keeps you and Mattie from just ridin' out some night?"

"Ike Culpepper and Curly Bob," answered the girl. "I was born there, and I've never been farther away than the Long Mesa and the Black River. And once to Pinto Point. Culpepper's tough hands turned us back from there. The Culpepper ranch on Black River and the crossing at Pinto Point are the only two places where you can cross the Black River. Ike Culpepper keeps those two crossings guarded night and day. We're no better than prisoners there in the Big Hole, Mort, Mattie and me."

"Not much of a life for a girl. Not much of a future. If I told you I could git you away for keeps, would you come, Mandy?"

"After you buy me from Mort?" Mandy's voice was brittle. "Is that what you mean, squaw man?" Her eyes darkened with swift contempt and anger.

"I don't aim to buy you. Mebbeso I did once. I don't remember. But I'm not buyin' you unless that's the only way to git you out of the Big Hole. Once I git you out, you're as free as that eagle yonder. You kin write your own ticket."

For a few seconds the blazing anger in his gray-blue eyes matched the smoldering fury in hers.

"A man can't buy love, you little fool!" he told her harshly.

Mandy Moran's red lips twisted in a queer smile. Her voice dropped to a throaty huskiness.

"Love, Lightnin'?"

He reined his horse alongside hers and took her in his arms. For a long second her lips were warm against his mouth. Then she clawed at him with both hands, yanking open his flannel shirt and the undershirt beneath.

They were both breathless from the brief struggle. As their horses shied away, the man saw her staring at his bare chest. At the livid red star branded there forever on his skin.

"So that's it!" Mandy's voice was harsh now. "I knew all along that you weren't Dave Carver. That night Dave Carver made the deal to buy me from Mort, he got over-anxious. He caught me alone and tried to kiss me. I had a jackknife and cut his cheek wide open from his ear to the corner of his mouth. He rode away in the night cussing and tying his handkerchief across his face. I know that knife-cut left a scar on Dave Carter's cheek. That's why I wanted to get the beard shaved off your face. When you did shave, there was no scar, so I knew that you couldn't be Dave Carver, even if you do look like him. But I didn't know that you were a sneaking, lowdown lawman!"

This was Mandy Moran, daughter of an outlaw mother and father. Brought up from babyhood to hate and fear and despise the law outside the badlands and the Big Hole. The curl of her lips, the

dark blaze of her eyes, the withering contempt in her voice, all made Lightnin' flinch as if she were quirting him.

There was nothing he could do, nothing he could say to change her. It made him feel sick inside.

"There's the short trail to Ike Culpepper's store, mister," she told him bitterly. "Ride it. You'll find Ike there—him and a couple of his outlaw cowpunchers. Ike Culpepper will take care of you. I'm turning back here. I'm going back to the Big Hole. I'd rather live out the rest of my life and die there than to take any kind of help from a sneaking badge toter. A lawman! I'm telling Mattie and Mort what you are, so you'd better not come back to the Big Hole. Hit your trail, mister!"

Mandy whirled her horse and rode back the way they had come. For a long moment Lightnin' stared after her. Then he took the trail to Ike Culpepper's store.

V.

The girl's strong hands had ripped the buttons from Lightnin's shirt and undershirt, so that they gaped open. The red star brand was there for anyone to see, and he made no move to cover his chest. His lips were pulled in a hard, flat grin, and his eyes were steely in the afternoon sun.

He knew the answer to his question. He was not Dave Carver. He was the law officer who had shot Dave Carver between the eyes a split second before the lightning had struck them both, as they rode toward one another in the storm-filled night.

Mandy Moran had turned up the hole card that Aunt Mattie had taken so much risk and pains to keep buried for him. Now the girl, hot with anger, would tell Mort Moran that the lightning-struck man was not Dave Carver, that he was a range detective. And Mort would spread that news like wildfire. No part of this broken badlands would be safe for the man with a law badge burned like a red brand on his chest.

He could ride hard, overtake the girl, tell her that Mattie had known from the beginning that he was not Dave Carver, that he was the range detective who had shot Carver between the eyes, there in the Red Pass. But that same sort of headlong anger would not let Lightnin' turn back now. He was not Dave Carver. He was not the outlaw who had made a dicker to buy the girl he wanted from her drunken, gambling, double-crossing father. He was a law officer. A range detective. A man who had held a job that called for a peculiar sort of courage that others call sneaking cowardice. And he did not even know his own name.

But Ike Culpepper would know the name of a range detective who looked enough like Dave Carver to be his twin brother. Ike Culpepper would know who he was. Ike might even know how he and Dave Carver happened to meet that stormy night in the Red Pass.

Lightnin' had racked his numbed brain until his head ached, trying to remember back. And always, in the back of all his thinking there had been one shadowy and vague sort of impression. That he was not a range detective. That he was Dave Carver. Up until now, when Mandy Moran had told him about cutting Dave Carver with a jackknife, he had been vaguely certain that he was actually the outlaw Dave Carver.

From Mattie and Mort Moran, from Shorty and the Turkey Track Kid, Lightnin' had picked up information concerning Dave Carver that had made him anything but proud of being that outlaw leader. From what Mattie had told him, from the bits of talk around the Big Hole that he could add up for what they might be worth, this Dave Carver was a bad hombre.

The picture that was painted of Dave Carver was this: That he was, first and last, a killer. A man who killed when there was no need for it. He had shot down men when he held up a bank with his gang, shot them down in cold blood. Harmless bank clerks who stood there with their hands in the air. He had shot down unarmed mail clerks when he had led his outlaw gang on a train robbery. Gutshot those unarmed men for some cold-blooded reason that not even the members of his own gang could excuse. They called him Killer Carver, Carver the Butcher, names like that.

Mattie had told Lightnin' that Dave Carver, outlaw, had not a single friend in the world. That Carver had murdered men who had trusted him. Shot them in the back because he was afraid of them, or because he was jealous of their tough reputations. Because he wanted to be the toughest of all the tough men who rode the Outlaw Trail.

When he got a few drinks, Mattie had said, Dave Carver would brag about how many men he had killed. How he had waited until they were slowed by too much booze, then picked his gun fight and beat them to the draw. How he had bushwhacked men he figured were faster gun-slingers than he was. How he had set traps for men he wanted to kill, sprung those traps with six-shooter or carbine or sawed-off shotgun.

Yet they had said of Dave Carver that in a tight he was worth a dozen of the average gun-fighters. That his nerves were as cold as strings of frozen wire. That he could think much faster than the average fighting man. In a tight spot where split-second thinking and shooting meant the difference between life and death, Dave Carver had shot his way out and the other men had died.

Dave Carver could plan things like a bank rob-

bery or train holdup, time every detail, boss the job, instill a self-confidence in his men that made for perfect teamwork. What killing there was to be done, Dave Carver did with a cold-blooded efficiency that made it look like a barnyard chore.

Concerning the past of Dave Carver, where he came from, why he had turned outlaw, facts began to get confused with a lot of hearsay legend. His past was shrouded in mystery. But his real name was Dave Carver, and he had never used any alias to hide behind. Unlike other outlaws, like the notorious Wild Bunch who vanished and appeared under new names in faraway places, Carver had kept his own name. He was proud of it. Proud to be recognized as the notorious killer, Dave Carver. He took a sadistic sort of pride in his blood-spattered reputation that made even brave men shudder.

That was the Dave Carver who had made a deal with Mort Moran to buy his daughter Mandy. A deal that Mort Moran had no intention of going through with. That was the Dave Carver that Curly Bob was going to kill. Dave Carver, squaw man!

Mattie had cautioned Lightnin' to act up to his hard reputation. Take a few drinks and brag about his killings. Show off his speed and deadliness with a gun by shooting at the tin-can target, right or left-handed. The shooting part of it had come easy enough. Lightnin' could shoot fast and straight with either hand. But the bragging part had almost nauseated him.

"My name is Carver," he would keep telling himself. "Mattie don't know it, but my real name *is* Carver. Dave Carver. I'd almost swear to that fact. But I can't remember killing any of those men. Not a one of them. I can't brag about bushwhacking men. I can't believe what Dave Carver believed—that if I hate a man bad enough to want to kill him, I kill that man without givin' him a fightin' chance to kill me first. Shoot him in the back. Kill him from the brush. Wait till he gets slowed down by too much whiskey, then tell him to fill his hand and shoot him down before he kin grab his gun. I can't remember killin' men like that. I can't remember killin' any men. And yet I'd gamble my chances of gettin' out o' the Big Hole alive, that my name *is* Dave Carver."

Now, headed for Ike Culpepper's store on Long Mesa, Lightnin' told himself that Mandy Moran had just proved that he was not Dave Carver.

"Then who in holy Hades am I?" he asked himself. "What's my name? How did I git into the Red Pass to the Big Hole the night of the storm?"

It was sundown when Lightnin' rode out of the scrub timber and into a clearing. And there in the clearing stood pole corrals, a log barn and sheds and a log house that must be Ike Culpepper's store.

Lightnin's right hand was still a little stiff and numb. He wore his six-shooter within easy reach of his left hand. His shirt and undershirt were open halfway to his waist so that the red-branded star showed plainly on his chest. A chest that had been hairy until the lightning had singed it bare, leaving that livid red star brand.

Two men were lounging in front of the store, sitting on their spurred boot heels, their backs against the log wall. They had carbines within easy reach, tilted against the wall of the store. Their hands were on their holstered six-shooters as Lightnin' rode across the hundred-yard clearing toward them. Hat brims tilted, eyes hard, slitted, the two men watched the lone rider. Even as Lightnin' watched them.

They were unshaven, hard-looking. One of them, a tall, lanky man, had on a battered black hat and the beard that hid the lines of his face was black and dust-powdered. The other man wore a gray felt town hat with sweat-marked black band. His two weeks' stubble of whiskers was sandy. Squatted on his hunkers, he looked small and wiry.

Lightnin' watched them narrowly. In his brain something was beginning to register. He had seen these men before. Perhaps he had known them. That lanky, black-bearded man. The small, red-whiskered man would have freckled hands. The trigger finger on his right hand would be gone. So that when he used a gun he crooked the second finger around the trigger.

"By Satan!" rasped the black-bearded man. "It's Carver!"

"A red star painted on his double-crossin' hide!" gritted the little red-whiskered man.

Instantly they were on their feet, their six-shooters sliding into the slanting sunlight. Off in the scrub timber to Lightnin's right a gun cracked. A bullet tore a hole in the tall man's dusky black hat.

Then they were shooting at Lightnin' and he was shooting at them, without quite knowing why, without even thinking. The six-shooter in his left hand was spewing fire, jerking with the recoil of every shot. He was shooting to kill. Shooting to save his own life. Shooting in self-defense against two men he had known somewhere along that forgotten back trail.

Lightnin' felt the burning rip of a bullet that slashed his cheek. Another slug searing his ribs. Meanwhile the lanky, black-bearded man was swaying back and forth, his long legs bending until his knees hit the ground and he toppled with his face sliding into the thick dust.

The little red-whiskered man had spun half around, collapsing sideways as though he had been hit in the side and kidneys with a club. The gray hat with the black band slid from his head, and as

it dropped to the ground the man went down on top of it. He was trying to hold his six-shooter with both hands, trying for a last shot before he died. He got the gun cocked, but the next second he lay there dead with the long-barreled, wooden-handled six-shooter cocked in his lifeless hands.

"Look out for Ike Culpepper!"

Lightnin' heard the shrill warning, and recognized the voice of Mandy Moran. He spurred his horse straight for the closed door of the store. No shots stopped him. No sign of Ike Culpepper. Only those two men who a few seconds ago had been alive and were now lying there dead, their blood blotted up by the heavy yellow dust in front of the store.

Mandy Moran rode up, a .30-30 carbine in her hand, as Lightnin' swung off his horse and flung his weight against the closed door of Ike Culpepper's store.

The door was barred and locked. Lightnin' quit trying to force it open. Blood smeared the whole side of his face as he leaned against the wall and grinned at the white-lipped girl.

"It looks," he said, spitting out the blood that came into his mouth, "like Ike Culpepper ain't keepin' his store open of a Sunday. Or is it a holiday? Mebbeso Ike Culpepper's birthday. Why ain't you back at the Big Hole, young un?"

"You fool! You tow-headed fool! Ridin' into it! You loco badge-branded fool!"

"Quit bawlin', Mandy. It was you that fired the shot that hit Missouri's hat and spoiled his aim and made the Red Gopher miss!"

"Miss? You're shot, you lightnin'-struck bonehead! Get on your horse. Let's quit here!"

"Not," said Lightnin', "until I have a medicine talk with Ike Culpepper."

"If Ike Culpepper was here"—Mandy's voice was calmer now—"he'd be talking to you with a Winchester. He's at the Black River Ranch. You're hurt. Your face is all blood."

For the first time since the shooting started, Lightnin' realized that he had been hit. His cheek had been ripped open, and his ribs felt as though he had been kicked by a mule. But he knew that he wasn't hurt badly. The main thing was that Mandy Moran was here. That she had perhaps saved his life. He squinted down at the two dead men, then up at the girl.

"Dave Carver left Missouri Jim Smith and the Red Gopher for the bounty they'd fetch him down in New Mexico. They must have broke jail down yonder and cold-trailed him. Mistook me for him. I had to kill 'em, or they'd have killed me. You saved my life, young un."

He was holding his right hand against his cheek to check the flow of blood. Trying to grin with a bullet-ripped face.

Mandy Moran sat her sweat-marked horse. She laid her carbine across her saddle cantle and the color came back slowly into her face.

"I trailed you," she explained in a low voice. "I had to. I don't know why. I hate you and everything you stand for, you sneaking detective. But when I saw those two outlaws I knew they'd kill you. They stopped at the Big Hole with Dave Carver six months ago. They weren't men, they were like mangy inbred wolves. They took you for Dave Carver. You knew they would. Who are you, anyway."

"My name"—he spat out more blood and tried to grin—"is Dave Carver. But let's keep on callin' me Lightnin'."

VI.

It was all mighty difficult to explain to Mandy, and because he was just beginning to remember the why and wherefor of a lot of things, and the back trail along his memory was blurred in too many places, Lightnin' did not try to give her much in the way of a real explanation.

"You'll just have to take my word for things, Mandy. And the main thing is for you to ride straight back to the Big Hole and tell Mattie that the sign is right. That we've got to go out tonight or not at all. She knows about the law-badge business. She had her own reasons for keepin' it secret. And the main reason is you. I'm to help you git out of this outlaw country for keeps. That's why she's never told anybody what happened that night in Red Pass when I got lightnin' struck. That mother of yours is the gamest woman on earth. You'd better not do anything to let her down."

Lightnin' looked at the girl sharply.

"What do you know about the law beyond the Big Hole?" he asked. "You've bin fed a lot of one-sided stories spilled by drunken outlaws. You've taken their word for things. But if ever you git out of this outlaw strip you'll realize that the laws are made and kept by decent people, and that law officers get mighty small pay for riskin' their lives to enforce those laws. But I've got no time to preach. I've got to git my chores done. And you've got to git back to the Big Hole as fast as your horse kin pack you.

"You tell Aunt Mattie this: That there was two Dave Carvers. Cousins. I'm the one that's alive. She knows what become of the one who made the squaw man dicker to buy you off Mort Moran. I just had to kill two of Dave Carver's gang. Mebbeso they mistook me for him. I think they did. Or they might remember me lookin' in through the bars

at 'em when they was locked up in that New Mexico jail where Dave Carver had railroaded 'em. Anyway, it don't matter much. They're dead. But Ike Culpepper ain't dead. He's on the prowl, and that's bad news. I'll cut his sign between now and daybreak. Tell Mattie that if I'm alive I'll meet her and you at the place she showed me. At daybreak. Tell her that tonight's the night we ride our luck. Now hit a long trot, young un. This ain't the time or place for me to be spillin' long windies."

"Let me bandage your face, Lightnin'."

"It's just a scratch. So's the nicked ribs. I'll 'tend to 'em."

"Don't try to break into the store," Mandy cautioned him. "Ike Culpepper has shotgun traps set on the front and back doors and the shuttered windows. Try to break in and you'll get blown apart by buckshot."

"There's nothin' in his store I want," said Lightnin'. "Git goin'. I'll meet you and Aunt Mattie at daybreak. Your mother knows where."

Mandy nodded her head. "I'll ride back to the Big Hole and tell Mattie. I won't say anything to Mort. That's Mattie's job."

"That," Lightnin' told her, "is usin' your head. I don't know where or how Mattie is cuttin' him on the deal. You saved my life by takin' that snap shot at those two renegades. I'm doin' my best to pay back the debts. And what I said about bein' in love with you still goes. So long, Mandy."

"So long, Lightnin'," she said. "Thanks. And take care of yourself."

When she had ridden away, Lightnin' bandaged his face and nicked ribs. Then he carried the two dead outlaws into a shed and covered them with an old tarpaulin.

Lightnin' had told Mandy that he had no business in Ike Culpepper's store. But he found a crowbar and went to work on one of the heavy-shuttered windows. He worked cautiously, keeping below the level of the window sill and off to one side.

As he levered the heavy shutter loose from its hinges, there was a terrific blast that sent a heavy charge of buckshot within a few inches of his head. Shattered window glass showered him. He found the trap just inside the window, a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun rigged to shoot through the window when the shutter was loosened.

A few minutes later Lightnin' was battering the lock off a big old iron strong box twice the size of those used by the Wells Fargo Co. to transport

valuable cargoes by train and stagecoach. He got the big strong box open and made a swift and thorough examination of its contents.

A lot of the papers Lightnin' found, he discarded. There was a grin on his bullet-ripped, bandaged face when he lifted out sheaf after sheaf of bank notes bound with paper tape. Eighty thousand dollars in new and used currency. He did not bother to count it as he stuffed it into a large canvas sack. He knew that he had found the loot from the Kansas City bank robbery.

Lightnin' tied the sack of money on the back of his saddle, and mounted his horse. He headed down the Long Mesa, taking the trail he knew led to Ike Culpepper's Black River Ranch. Dusk was already hiding the distant badlands' peaks. Its shadows thickened in the scrub timber and brush that spotted the Long Mesa.

Lightnin' took his time. There was no hurry. He needed the cover of night to hide his movements, to give him some sort of a fighting break against the men he had to put out of commission between now and daybreak. He was playing a lone-handed, dangerous game, matching his wits and courage against the cunning and bushwhacking deadliness of Ike Culpepper, Curly Bob and their outlaw cowpuncher outfit.

It gave Lightnin' time to remember back over things. Figure out just who and what he was, and what had fetched him into the Red Pass that night he got struck by lightning.

Sight of Missouri and the Red Gopher and the shooting had jogged something in Lightnin's brain that began to make it function. And he knew that his name was actually Dave Carver. But he was not Dave Carver, the outlaw.

About five months ago he remembered walking into the U. S. marshal's office in Kansas City.

At least one of the mysterious strangers Aunt Mattie had been waiting for would never ride into the Big Hole—and the other would go in under gun guard.

"My name is Dave Carver," he had told the marshal. "Keep your gun in its holster. I'm not the Dave Carver that robbed a bank here in Kansas City about a month ago, though I kin pass for him in a crowd and amongst men who don't know either of us too well.

"The Dave Carver your reward dodger describes is my cousin. He murdered my father and a younger brother of mine when he took to the Outlaw Trail a few years ago. They had caught him and some of his renegades running off a bunch of horses from our ranch in Arizona.

"You want Dave Carver for that bank robbery and some other crimes. I want to cut his sign. When I do, I aim to kill him. I'm a cowpuncher, not a man hunter, but if you'll stake me to a law badge and tell me where you figure Dave Carver kin be located, I'll go after him. I won't fetch him back alive, though. Your hangin' law misses fire too many times.

"I know that the banks and railroads have hired detectives to trail Dave Carver. Those detectives have either bin killed or scared off or have lost his trail. But the law must have some notion where this cousin of mine kin be located. You keep your information secret. I know that. But if you'll pass it on to me for what it's worth and give me one of them tin stars to pin to my undershirt, I think I know how to git the job done. I've turned my Arizona outfit over to a pardner of mine. He'll look after it till I git back. If I don't git back, the outfit's his. How'd you like to put me on Dave Carver's trail?"

There had been some red tape to untangle and cut, some secret information regarding the outlaw Dave Carver's habits was obtained from the reports of range detectives who had failed to bring him to justice. But finally the U. S. marshal had handed Lightnin' a law badge and a bench warrant for Dave Carver.

"So far as we can learn," the marshal had told him, "your cousin Dave Carver is on his way up the Outlaw Trail. He will stop at such hide-outs as Robbers' Roost, Brown's Park, the Hole in the Wall. But Carver has a girl up in Wyoming. In the heart of the outlaw badlands at a place called the Big Hole. He's stuck on this girl, and is going up there to marry her. That much the detectives have picked up from Carver's whiskey talk that makes his trail easy to follow at times."

The officer had handed Lightnin' a paper.

"Here is a map of that outlaw country," he explained. "It shows how to get into the Big Hole and onto what's called the Long Mesa. But the law officers who have gone into that country have never come out alive.

"In the Big Hole is a killer named Mort Moran. His wife is a woman outlaw called Aunt Mattie. It's their daughter Mandy whom Dave Carver is going after. On the Long Mesa is a renegade Mormon named Ike Culpepper, who runs a store on Long Mesa that's an outlaw hang-out. If you don't find your man in the Big Hole, you'll find him at Culpepper's store. Ike Culpepper is the real brains behind the Dave Carver gang. He grubstakes these outlaws, tells them what bank or train to rob, and just how to go about it. And when they bring him currency that is dangerous because the serial numbers are known and posted throughout the country, Culpepper buys this dangerous money at hockshop discount rates.

"Outlaws like Dave Carver are always wanting ready money. Ike Culpepper doesn't need ready money. He's content to buy this dangerous currency for a tenth of its real value, hold it a few years, then slip it into circulation in big cities like New York and San Francisco. And if it's unsigned currency, Culpepper forges the signatures that make it complete.

"So Ike Culpepper's store on the Long Mesa is a clearinghouse for outlaw loot," the marshal concluded. "He's their fence, their pawnbroker. The money will be in Ike Culpepper's safe or strong box."

"I'm not after the money," Lightnin' remembered telling the lawman.

"I know that," the marshal had told him. "But if you can fetch it out of that outlaw strip and deliver it to me, it'll net you more than your Arizona ranch pays you in ten years. Or is it a big outfit you own?"

"Just a two-bit spread."

"So I figured. How old are you, Carver?"

"Twenty-three."

"I'd advise you to hand me back that badge and bench warrant, and go back to your two-bit spread in Arizona. Even if you get droughted out, you'll be ahead of the game.

"Take a look at that map. No law officer, even good range detectives who know all the tricks of their dangerous game, has ever ridden into that outlaw strip and lived to tell what he saw there. Why don't you take the advice of an old gray-haired peace officer, son, and go back to your ranch? Sooner or later the law will hamstring your cousin Dave Carver. He'll be shot or sent to prison or hanged."

"My father was as fine a man as ever lived," Lightnin' had said doggedly. "A square cowman. My kid brother was only seventeen. Dave Carver led them into a bushwhack trap and killed 'em. I'm trailin' Dave Carver, the murderin' snake that has the same name as mine, and looks enough like me to be my twin. When I find him, I'm killin' him. If I kin fetch back that eighty thousand dollars, it'll lift the mortgage on my cow outfit. So long, marshal—and thanks."

"Pin that star to your undershirt," the U. S. marshal had told him. "Good luck, son. You'll need it."

So, Lightnin' remembered, had begun the long man hunt, cold-trailing the outlaw who looked enough like him to be his twin brother. He had seen Missouri and the Red Gopher in that New Mexico jail where they had been locked up on secret information supplied by their leader, Dave Carver.

At hide-outs such as Robbers' Roost and Brown's Park and the Hole in the Wall he had been taken for Dave Carver, the outlaw. And so he had played his game. A dangerous, cunning game.

The evening of the storm had marked the beginning of the end of his hunt for the outlaw. He had ridden boldly up to Ike Culpepper's store on Long Mesa, and had been met at the door by the one-time schoolmaster. Ike Culpepper had asked him what he was doing there.

"I paid you every dollar that Kansas City stuff was worth to me, Carver," he had said. "You've double-crossed your men and I know it. You've bargained for Mandy Moran at the Big Hole. Then go get her. But unless I'm a bad hand at guessing the right answers, Mattie will fill that lean belly of yours full of hot lead. You've made your whiskey brag that you were buying Mandy Moran. Now let's see if you're man enough to do it. Fetch her here and I'll give you a wedding celebration, Dave Carver. Now get the hell gone!"

That had been the way of it. And there in the Red Pass that leads into the Big Hole, Lightnin' had met his cousin. They had met almost face to face on the trail. Lightnin' remembered jerking his six-shooter and pulling the trigger. Then a blinding white glare. And he had come alive with the rain in his face and Mattie bending over him, a gun in her hand.

It all came back now as Lightnin' Dave Carver rode the Long Mesa.

VII.

The day had been sultry, and with sundown had come a hot blast of wind. Thunderhead clouds had been bunching, white-fleeced, black-edged like crepe, on the distant broken skyline. Heat lightning had flashed across the twilight, and there was the growl of distant thunder now as the moon rode through piling black clouds.

The big birds, called bull bats or night hawks, dove swiftly, snapping at mosquitoes. A hoot owl called and Lightnin' Dave Carver wondered if it was a real owl or some renegade giving a signal of his coming. Another hoot owl answered and Lightnin's six-shooter slid from its holster.

So he rode with his gun in his hand as darkness thickened and the moonlight and shadows of scrub timber splotched the Long Mesa. And his eyes, straining to catch the movement of some ambushing enemy, began playing him tricks. He kept seeing movements where there was none, as the wind pulled scrub piñon branches into moving, manlike shapes. It slowed Lightnin' Dave Carver's progress, whetting his nerves to razor edge. And only by calling on all his nerve and common sense did he restrain his trigger finger when the wind whipped the brush into a moving black blot that looked like a man crouched along the side of the trail.

The bullet rip in his face was sending throbbing pains into his head and thumping blood into his right ear with a hammering persistence that deafened him in that ear. His bullet-nicked ribs were hurting until his whole right side was one twisting aching pain. Pain that was made almost intolerable when his horse would shift from a shuffling walk into a slow trot.

The pain and the waiting for danger to break was scraping Lightnin's nerves raw. He cursed the two dead outlaws who had nicked him with their gun lead, the hoot owl that might be a bushwhack signal. And when a coyote yapped crazily he stiffened in his saddle, eyes and ears strained to catch the difference between reality and human imitation of the coyote's night yapping. He even thought he heard cattle bawling. A cow or two that had been separated from their calves on a night drive.

Then he heard shots. Carbine or six-shooter shots. And that was no trick of the imagination. The shooting was not more than a mile away. Lightnin' Dave Carver stood in his stirrups to ease the jolting, and spurred his horse to a lope, his six-shooter gripped in his hand.

The shooting sounded closer, staccato-sharp against the faraway roll of thunder. And then, somewhere ahead, he heard the sound of a man's maniacal laugh. It was a deep, booming laugh that cracked into something like a wail, and the sound of it made Lightnin' Dave Carver shudder.

He forgot his pain and the aching throbbing in his head as he realized that Ike Culpepper was riding the Long Mesa. Apparently the man had gone off on one of his mad night prowls, hunting for Mort Moran. His mind warped and twisted into a maniacal killer's brain. Shooting at whatever moved. Moonlight and shadows. A hot, dust-powdered night wind shoving and pushing and back-lashing trees and brush into moving shadows.

Suddenly a big drive of stampeding cattle were crashing through the brush. Men on horseback riding hard, cursing, shooting. Ike Culpepper's wild, crazy, brittle laughter coming down the black wind like a banshee wail.

It was all unreal, like some bad nightmare a man has when he's on a long drunk.

Lightnin' Dave Carver sighted a pair of riders in the moonlight. One of them was either very drunk or badly hurt, because his horse was slowed to a walk, and he was doubled over the saddlehorn and hanging on with both hands. The other rider was trying to help him stay on his horse.

"Never mind me, Shorty," the doubled-over rider

was saying. "I'm a-dyin'. Save your own hide, pardner. That damn Curly Bob double-crossin' us! That locoed Culpepper shootin' a man. . . . Hightail it, Shorty, before they cut yuh down!"

It was the Turkey Track Kid. And Shorty. Pardners. They pulled up and Shorty eased the dying man to the ground.

Dave Carver rode up, his gun in his hand. He called out to them not to shoot.

"Don't kill him, Shorty," said the Turkey Track Kid. "You might need 'im." Then he closed his eyes, shuddered, and was dead.

"You started this, squaw man," gritted Shorty. "Looks like you'd tangled some yourself. Too bad Ike Culpepper didn't kill you before Mattie fetched you to the Big Hole. Till you showed up with your bank haul and your squaw buyin', we was gittin' along good with Curly Bob and Ike Culpepper. Gatherin' Ike's likker. Playin' stud poker with Mort.

"Then tonight we got sucked into the trap. Four of your blasted gang showed up while me 'n' the Turkey Track Kid and a couple-three boys from the Little Hole was fetchin' a big drive of cattle across the Long Mesa to the ranch on Black River.

"Them four fellers is on your trail, hombre. Missouri and the Red Gopher just got out o' jail. The other two come from the Hole in the Wall, or mebbe Robbers' Roost. They want their money and they're after your hide.

"Two of 'em headed for Culpepper's store to git their money from Ike, or kill him. The other two has just come from the Big Hole. Mattie run 'em off. They're on the prowl right now, huntin' you and Ike Culpepper. They're hangin' your hide on a fence, mister. And they're collectin' their Kansas City bank money that you hocked to Ike for fifty cents on the dollar.

"I ain't havin' no gun ruckus with you, Carver. I've seen you shoot. I know about men you've killed because you didn't like the way they wore their hats or spurs. I'm huntin' no gun ruckus with you, Dave Carver. So ride along. Your men is after yuh. Ike Culpepper is crazy loco and shootin' at anything that moves. He shot my pardner. His tough hands stole our cattle. Curly Bob is huntin' you and the girl. He's killin' you where he cuts your sign, and he's takin' the girl. And he's collectin' that eighty thousand dollars from Ike Culpepper for his weddin'-trip money.

"Ike's got a hell of a lot more money cached. Curly Bob trails him of a night to see if the locoed old son will lead him to it. Once he gits onto that cache, he'll gut-shoot Ike Culpepper and spit in his laughin' mouth, because he hates Ike's guts.

"Curly Bob is Ike's son," Shorty went on. "Yeah. Ike quit his Mormon wife and son when Curly Bob was a button of a kid. Ike stole a big chunk of money from the Mormon church and quit Utah between sundown and daybreak. He quit his schoolmaster job, his wife and kid, and turned outlaw to foller a female outlaw called Mattie. But Mort Moran was the man that Mattie married.

"Ike Culpepper's boy growed to be a man. He promised his dyin' mother he'd trail down Ike and git even with his father for desertin' them. When Curly Bob found Ike he told him that unless Ike done what he told him, he'd fetch a pack of them hard cases here and they'd take over. Which he's done. Them tough hands that take orders from Curly Bob is renegade Mormons, kicked out o' Utah by the Mormon church.

"Everybody thinks that Ike Culpepper owns the Black River Ranch and gits the money for the cattle we rustled and sold. They're dead wrong. Curly Bob is the feller that's gittin' rich off them stolen cattle that gits peddled in Montana. He owns the Black River Ranch.

"All Ike Culpepper owns on earth is his two-bit tradin' store. When he makes dickers with outlaws, Curly Bob shows up and takes the profits off him. So, between losin' Mattie to Mort Moran, then havin' Curly Bob show up with his hard cases, Ike Culpepper got to broodin' till his brain cracked. One night a few months ago he went locoed. Curly Bob's men keep him a prisoner here on the Long Mesa. They won't let him cross the Black River. Won't let him git off the mesa. And to make him brood even more, Curly Bob was lettin' him keep the money he couldn't never spend, in his strong box where he could count it over and over, knowin' that it really belonged to Curly Bob.

"The night Ike went locoed Curly Bob was at the Big Hole lookin' Mandy over to see if she was gittin' old enough to steal. He always tortured Mattie and Mort Moran with the notion that him and his men had 'em trapped. He was always tellin' Mattie that when Mandy got old enough and purty enough to suit his fancy, he was claimin' her. Because that was the best way he could think of to punish the woman who had made Ike Culpepper desert his wife and baby boy. That Curly Bob knows how to hate, mister.

"So while Curly Bob was at the Big Hole and his men were on guard along Black River, Ike Culpepper was alone at his store on Long Mesa, countin' all the money that he'd hoarded and could never spend. That night his brain cracked.

"He filled his pockets full of cartridges, shoved all that money he'd bin playin' with into a gunny sack, and pulled out. He was gunnin' for Mort Moran, and shootin' at everything that moved, thinkin' he was shootin' at Mort. Playin' gun tag again.

"About daybreak the next mornin' Ike showed up at the Big Hole. His eyes were bloodshot and glassy, and he was laughin' his crazy, locoed laugh. He thought he killed Mort Moran a hundred times that night. His guns were empty and he was out of cartridges. And he was ridin' into the Big Hole to claim Mattie for his bride. Locoed! Plumb, crazy locoed!

"Curly Bob kept Mort Moran and Mattie from killin' Ike. He tied him on a fresh horse out o' Mattie's barn and took him back to the Long Mesa. But Curly Bob got one hell of a jolt that morning when he got Ike back to the store. The strong box was empty. All that money he'd tortured Ike into keepin' for him was gone.

"Somewhere, sometime durin' that first locoed night ride, Ike Culpepper either lost or cached that gunny sack full of money. He came out of his locoed fit in a few hours, and he swore he couldn't remember what he done with that gunny sack. So, since then, whenever Ike Culpepper goes locoed, Curly Bob cold-trails him, hopin' that the locoed son will lead him to that money cache. He's a-trailin' Ike Culpepper right now.

"I told you all this, Dave Carver," said Shorty, "so that you will know just what you're up against. You ain't got a chance of ever gittin' off the Long Mesa alive. You've lost your purty young squaw. Tonight is the night that Curly Bob is claimin' her. Even if he can't locate Ike's cache, he's got that eighty thousand dollars you stole from the Kansas City bank. It's locked up in the store and the store is locked and set with shotgun traps at the doors and windows. Curly Bob told Missouri and the Red Gopher to wait there till he showed up and he'd pay 'em off. Them two outlaws don't suspect that they're gonna get paid off in bullets.

"Now leave me here with my dead pardner. I'm buryin' him so's the wolves and coyotes can't git at him. Then I'm goin' after Ike Culpepper and I'm killin' him, regardless of Curly Bob's orders. Ride along, Dave Carver. It's your night to die. Mebbeso I'll be meetin' you in hell for breakfast. Because when I kill the locoed son of a snake that killed my pardner, them hombres will git me for hornin' into their game. So long, squaw man!"

There was no sense in staying here. Lightnin' Dave Carver had chores to do. The odds were stacked high against him, but he was willing to gamble his chances. Everything now depended on the courage and cunning of Mattie Moran. There was a way out of this badlands country that she alone knew. She had taken Lightnin' Dave Carver there to a certain place where the trail was lost in the rocks and boulders.

"This is where you'll meet me some night when the sign is right, Lightnin'," Mattie had told him. "I'll take you this far tonight—but no farther. Beyond here is a way out that no man on earth knows. It's Mandy's trail out of the outlaw badlands. You're a law officer and a man. You're free to live outside the outlaw badlands. It will be your job to take care of my daughter out in the world where I can't go.

"Here is where you'll meet me some night. I'll have Mandy with me. You'll take her out. Now raise your right hand and swear by everything you claim for God and decency and honor that you'll forever look after my baby girl Mandy."

There Lightnin' Dave Carver had sworn. And tonight was the night.

VIII.

It might take hours before the real force of the storm struck. Right now there was a hot, gusty wind, and scudding black clouds that every once in a while hid a round white moon. The air charged with electricity, heat lightning that reddened the sky and threw into bold relief the jagged outline of the badlands peaks and grotesque high-piled granite and sandstone monuments. And behind the skyline the distant thunder rumbled its ominous warning.

For Lightnin' Dave Carver that thunder was all too real a warning. He dreaded the coming of that lightning and crashing thunder even more than he dreaded the gun-blazing conflict with Ike Culpepper and Curly Bob and these renegades he had just learned were members of a mysterious and feared band of sworn killers.

Since that night a month or so ago when he and that other Dave Carver had been struck by lightning, when his horse had been killed and the other horse had been killed and his cousin's bullet-marked body had been blackened and nearly charred in places by the forked lightning, there had been one other storm such as that.

It had come not more than a week ago. One night when Mattie, with some idea in her head that thunder and lightning might bring back Lightnin's lost memory, had seen the storm coming and had taken him into the Red Pass to await its breaking.

"Call it just the fool notion of a woman, Lightnin'," she had told him. "But there's another cloudburst storm coming. You and I will ride into the Red Pass. We'll sit our horses where you and Dave Carver sat yours that night.

"Dave Carver was prowling in the Red Pass that night with his gun in his hand, suspecting that I was bushed up somewhere waiting for him with a loaded Winchester. And you were riding into the Red Pass on your way into the Big Hole. Carver must have heard you coming. He turned back and

"Curly Bob's ooyotin' in and out of those rocks," Lightnin' called to the two women, "but I'll play a game of gun tag with him if that's the way he wants it."

rode in behind that big old pine tree. He had his gun in his hand, and was waiting to kill you, no matter who you were.

"Now I'll be Dave Carver. I'll sit my horse there by that lightnin'-struck pine. You sit your horse where I found you that night. When the lightning and thunder come crashing down into the high cliffs that wall in the Red Pass, if the lightning strikes close, it might jog your memory back into place. Savvy? You'll remember who you are and how come you killed Dave Carver. And why you had a bench warrant for him and a tally book that had a list of names of all of us who live in this strip of outlaw badlands. This lightning storm just might clear the cobwebs out of that brain of yours, and we'll get the real savvy of things. But don't go shootin' me between the horns in the middle of the game. Mebbeso you'd better take the cartridges out of your six-shooter before we put on this act."

So they had ridden into the Red Pass. They had sat their horses there in the pass that was walled in by sheer rocky cliffs that were several hundred feet high.

Lightnin' had felt uneasy as the storm came closer. A cold sweat had bathed his whole body. The crash of thunder had made him shudder and the pit of his stomach tightened into a hard knot. The darkness had hidden the expression on his face, though once when a lightning flash turned the black night into vivid white light, Mattie had told him that he looked the color of a snake's belly and his eyes were plenty wild. She said she was glad he was putting on this stage act with an empty gun.

A little while after the storm really struck the Red Pass. Thunder rolled and crashed, and the rocky cliffs flung the deafening echoes back and forth until the earth shook and the terrific din was like the unceasing roar of a cannon battle.

Then the lightning had struck not more than a hundred yards away. Lightnin' Dave Carver had let out a hoarse groan of stark terror. Dropping his gun, he had quit his horse and crawled in behind some big granite boulders and crouched there, shivering and trembling like a gun-shy dog.

There Mattie had found him after a while when the lightning flare had shown his horse with an empty saddle. And she had stood there near where he crouched, covering his face with his arms, his eyes staring and glassy with terror.

She had thought to fetch along a bottle of Mort's whiskey. She made Lightnin' drink nearly the whole bottle.

There had been no sort of contempt or anger in her voice or in the depths of her gray-black eyes, as she said:

"Pour that likker into your system, mister. You need it. Get drunk if you have to. And if it'll help any, I'll stuff mud in your ears and tie a blindfold

across your eyes. That was a loco thing to do to you, pardner. Just like a fool woman, ain't it? It's only a few weeks ago that you were nearly killed by lightnin' right here in this same Red Pass. You didn't know, and I didn't realize that it left you lightnin' scared. Mebbeso you'll be that way the rest of your life. That's it, drink hearty.

"I had a dog once," Mattie had said. "A ketch dog. He was big and brindle-colored, with jaws and teeth that could tear anything apart. He weighed over a hundred pounds, an' he'd tackle anything on earth.

"But since the time he was a little old pup he was scared of thunder and lightnin'. Let that thunder roll miles away and that big fightin' ketch dog would crawl under the bunk or into the brush or wherever he could hole up. He'd shiver and shake just like you're doin' now. I'd unsaddle my horse and cover his head with the saddle blanket if the storm caught us away from camp. Or if we were home I'd get a blanket or soogan and cover him up and let him alone. It would be hours before he got back to where his eyes lost that wild glaze and his stumpy tail could wag.

"That dog was the gamest, bravest thing that ever walked on four legs, mister. But he was lightnin' scared. He used to prowl off on lonesome hunts. I found him dead one day after he'd turned up missing. He'd tackled a silver-tip grizzly. I picked up that grizzly's trail, and I was going to kill it if it was my last act on earth. I didn't need to fire a shot. A mile away from where my dead dog lay, I found Mr. Grizzly, his guts chewed out, his throat chewed into a bloody mess. Deader than a rock.

"That was my lightnin'-scared dog, mister. His grave is marked with a pile of rocks there in the Big Hole. The gamest, bravest dog that ever lived—but scared of a thunder storm. Kill what's left in the bottle, Lightnin'. And don't call yourself any kind of a coward."

Mattie had kept that night's experiment a secret. She had never afterward mentioned it. When Lightnin' had tried to talk about it, she had shut him up.

But they both knew that he was lightning-scared. That probably, even if he lived to be a hundred years old, he would never be able to conquer that stark, unreasoning fear.

And tonight, the night that he and Mattie had to get Mandy out of the outlaw badlands, a lightning storm was coming. By comparison, the guns of the man who would be hunting him down to kill him, would be harmless. If that lightning storm struck at dawn when they were set to make their getaway, Lightnin' Dave Carver would be as helpless as that lightning-scared ketch dog that had killed a grizzly.

He heard the distant rumble of thunder and shivered. Shivered with dread.

Off in the distance, across the scrub pine and brush-spotted Long Mesa, Lightnin' Dave Carver heard the maniacal laugh of Ike Culpepper coming down with the black wind. Then the sound of shots.

IX.

The Long Mesa was, it seemed to Lightnin' Dave Carver, covered with scattered little bunches of moving cattle. And when he tried to estimate the number of guns that were banging out there in the night it sounded as though a small pitched battle was raging. Ike Culpepper was by no means the only gun-slinger shooting at moving shadows tonight.

Lightnin' heard Ike Culpepper's crazy laugh now and then And a voice that he would have sworn belonged to Mort Moran, cursing, blaspheming, drunken.

The voices of other men called out to one another. Men who were riding the Long Mesa and were spread out and were keeping in touch with one another by shouting.

"Where yuh from?" a voice would shout.

"Powder River!" would come the answer.

Lightnin' Dave Carver rode cautiously, his gun in his hand. The shooting was scattered. He could no longer hear Ike Culpepper's insane laugh. No longer hear the voice that he was certain belonged to Mort Moran.

"Where yuh from?"

A rider had suddenly loomed up out of the dark not a hundred feet ahead of him.

"Powder River!" barked Dave Carver quickly.

"Keep shovin' to'rds the Black River. We got them rustlers on the run. We'll run 'em into the river, and them we don't shoot will drown. Then we'll clean out the Big Hole. Anybody git Ike Culpepper or Curly Bob yet?"

"Hard to tell!" Lightnin' called back. "Who are you?"

"Tom Trask of the T Down. What's your outfit?"

"Lightnin' brand!"

"Powder River!" shouted the man. "This way, men! I think I got one of them rustlers out o' the Big Hole. He ain't packin' no white flag!"

Lightnin' Dave Carver saw now, too late, that the man had a white handkerchief or rag tied to his gun barrel, and was holding it high like a flag. Then the carbine barrel dropped, spitting flame. A bullet whined angrily past Dave Carver's head.

This was no time to fight. Lightnin' whirled his horse and spurred in behind a brush patch and rode off at a run. Shots cracked. Men shouted. Dave outrode them and eased to a trot.

It began to make sense now. The warring cow outfits had at last declared some sort of truce. They had joined forces and invaded the Long Mesa. They were wiping out the rustlers of Long Mesa, the Big Hole and Little Hole. Things were happening fast tonight.

There was only one course left for Lightnin' to follow. Get across the Long Mesa. Meet Aunt Mattie and Mandy at the place Mattie had shown him the other night. The outlaw badlands was getting too thickly populated. It was wolf cunning, not bravery, that would save his hide now. He was playing a lone-handed game, twisting and dodging. Bushing up whenever he heard riders anywhere near like a wolf dodging the hound pack. It wasn't a game he liked, but he had to play it.

He had fifteen miles or more to go, and daybreak was not more than two hours away. There was a bad lightning storm on the way. He wondered if Mattie and Mandy had gotten out of the Big Hole. No time now to ride back there to find out. No time to do anything but get across the Long Mesa. Find that rocky strip of badlands below the mesa where Mattie had told him there was a secret way out. And if she didn't show up to pilot him from there on, he was trapped by both Curly Bob's men and the cattlemen who were killing the rustlers where they found them. He was playing hide and seek with what seemed to add up to a big-sized army, judging from the shouting and gun music they were making.

It seemed like a hundred hours before Lightnin' finally reached the edge of the high mesa and found the steep trail that led off it to the badlands below. The black clouds were thickening. Thunder and lightning getting nearer. Now and then a big rain drop struck him. The night wind had lost its heat and there was a chill to it that dried the sweat on his hide and clothes.

He let his horse pick its way down the slant. Finally he was on the level ground of a canyon, and from here, he knew, it was no more than a mile across the rocky floor of the canyon mouth to where he should be meeting Mattie and her daughter Mandy.

A Winchester cracked, and the bullet whined over Lightnin' Dave's head. He jumped his horse in behind a patch of brush. Ike Culpepper's crazy laugh came down out of the rocks.

Then, from the opposite direction, another carbine cracked, and there was the ugly whine of a bullet striking granite and ricocheting.

"Fight like a man, yuh blasted he-schoolmarm!" Mort Moran's whiskey voice echoed in the canyon. "Ride out into the open and fight like you had some guts! I'm after your mangy hide tonight, Ike! I'm hangin' it on the corral. Fight out in the open, you loco-brained bushwhacker. Me 'n' you has played gun tag long enough. Let's git the job done. I'm a-comin' after yuh, Ike. If you got any guts, ride halfway to meet me and come a-shootin'. Mattie's a-holdin' the stakes. You still there, Mattie?"

"I'm still here, Mort," his wife called. "Show your nerve, Ike. The best man wins. I've got your gunny sack full of money. You've both bin spoilin' for another gun fight.. Ride out from behind the rocks and fight, Ike Culpepper!"

Lightnin' Dave Carver wondered if this was a nightmare. He saw Mort Moran, a carbine in his hand, ride out from behind a high cliff and into the moonlight.

Then Ike Culpepper spurred his horse from behind a nest of boulders. The next moment the two old enemies were shooting at each other. Mort silent and deadly. Ike Culpepper's insane laughter mingling with the echoing crash of the two carbines.

Mort's horse whirled and reared and pitched, throwing its rider. The horse trotted off crabwise to keep from stepping on the trailing bridle reins.

Mort still gripped his carbine, but he was hit. He crawled in behind some rocks and reloaded.

Ike Culpepper's played-out horse stumbled and fell as the crazy owl-hooter tried to spur the animal to a run. Ike landed on his feet and lurched in behind some rocks not a hundred feet from where Mort Moran crouched.

Lightnin' Dave Carver could see neither man now. But he could see the spitting flame of their guns and hear the spatting crack and glancing whine of their bullets hitting the rocks.

Both men were wounded. They were fighting it out to the death. Lightnin' Dave Carver knew that neither of them would ever come out alive from behind their rocky barricades.

There was something in the stark finality of that gun duel that held Dave Carver in a strange grip. Then he heard Mattie's voice calling his name and he realized that the night was gone and the sky was graying and streaked with crimson in the east while up out of the west rolled a heavy black storm. Thunder was rolling down across the broken badlands and chain lightning was splitting the black cloud behind him.

"Lightnin'!" called Mattie. "Rattle your hocks, man! Come along!"

Dave had to ride across the line of fire between the two patches of granite boulders where Mort

Moran and Ike Culpepper were fighting their last Winchester duel. But unless a stray bullet hit him or his horse, the ride would be a safe one. Those two old enemies were shooting at nobody but each other.

Dave Carver took a deep breath and spurred his horse to a run. He could almost feel the hot breath of those two carbines as he rode the gantlet between the two guns.

Then he was safe on the other side, where Mattie and her daughter were sitting their horses. The faces of both women looked grayish, drained of blood. Their dark eyes were hard and their mouths were set in grim lines.

"Mort wanted it like that," said Mattie. "When I gave him the forty thousand dollars I found on Dave Carver's saddle that night you killed him, he handed it to Mandy. Said that was what he'd intended doing with it. He gave it all to her for a getaway stake. I told Mort that you were a law officer, and that I was sending Mandy outside with you. I told him you'd sworn to see that she got a square deal. Mort got a laugh out of it. He said he never figured he'd be trusting a badge polisher with everything he had left in the world. He said to give you his regards. Let's go."

Mattie rode back out into the open. Her voice was steady and calm and brave.

"Mandy's goin' out with Lightnin'. I'll be back, Mort. I'm not quittin' you."

"You go with them, Mattie," her outlaw husband called back. "I'm done for. Shot twice in the belly. But I just got Ike Culpepper. His head showed and I made a bull's-eye."

Mattie rode in behind the rocks where Mort was. Mandy was right behind her. A little distance away Ike Culpepper lay on his back. His body was bullet riddled. The last slug had struck him in the forehead and mushroomed its way out the back of his skull.

"Stand your hand, squaw man!" called a voice from the rocks a hundred yards beyond. "It's you and me for it!"

It was the hard, cold, flat-toned voice of Curly Bob.

His last words were drowned by a heavy clap of thunder. A fraction of a second later a bolt of chain lightning struck the rocks not far away.

Lightnin' Dave Carver felt the brassy taste in his mouth. The stink of burned sulphur filled his nostrils and spread through his brain like the fumes of poison gas. He felt himself shivering. Cold sweat bathed his whole body.

"That ketch dog killed a grizzly!" he heard Mattie's voice call out. "Git your bear meat, Lightnin' Dave Carver!"

X.

This was it. The last showdown. That crash of lightning had left Dave Carver still on his feet. Still with his gun in his hand. And in behind that pile of granite boulders was the man he had to kill.

As the last echoes of the thunder died away in the high-walled canyon, Lightnin' Dave Carver saw Mandy Moran step out into the open. He heard her voice, steady and fearless.

The owlhoot's toughest renegades drifted into the Big Hole but they all took orders from Aunt Mattie.

"What you said about loving me, Lightnin', goes double. I'm going outside with you when you've killed that renegade snake. But on one condition. Mattie goes with us."

"I'll tell a man," called Dave Carver, "she goes with us. Plumb down to Arizona. My place is on the Mexican border. The three of us kin live in Sonora if we have to. Now step back where you won't git hit by a stray bullet— What'll it be, Curly?" he called, wondering if his voice sounded as shaky as his gun hand was. "Gun tag or out in the open?"

Mandy had stepped back in behind the pile of rocks. There was no reply from Curly Bob. The rain swept down through the canyon now with the wind driving it in a heavy gray wall. Lightning crashed and the thunder broke between the rocky walls with deafening force.

In behind the boulders where Mort Moran had died, Mattie and her daughter Mandy were burying the dead man. They piled small rocks on top of him, then rolled bigger granite boulders into a rocky monument that would forever mark the place where Mort Moran, outlaw, had died with his boots on and a smoking gun in his hand. Perhaps they left tears there, and a prayer of some sort for the dead owlhooter.

As the cold rain drenched Lightnin' Dave Carver, and he watched the carbine grow steady in his hands, he knew that no matter what might happen, he was no longer afraid of lightning. Mattie's story of a grizzly killing ketch dog, the love of the girl, the certainty that he must kill the renegade Curly Bob—and something far bigger than all that—had wiped the fear of lightning out of his brain and heart.

Curly Bob was not going to fight him in the open. The renegade had too much at stake to risk it all on a fair gun fight. Curly Bob knew now that Mattie had somehow found Ike Culpepper's cache. He knew that she had forty thousand dollars she had gotten from a man named Dave Carver. And he had ridden back to the store to find Missouri and the Red Gopher killed and the strong box rifled, so he knew the man called Lightnin' had all the rest of the loot.

"You keep in behind those rocks, Mattie!" called Lightnin' Dave Carver. "Curly Bob aims to kill you. He's coyotin' in and out of the rocks. You and Mandy take care of yourselves. I'm playin' gun tag with that hombre. That's the only way he knows how to fight."

Dave Carver slipped out from behind the patch of boulders. A bullet kicked rocky splinters in his face. He ducked back and tried the old trick of putting his hat on the end of his gun barrel and easing it out from behind the rocks until the crown of the hat showed.

Curly Bob's carbine cracked. A bullet ripped the felt crown of the hat. Dave Carver shot twice as he flipped the hat from the end of the carbine barrel. He knew that one of his bullets had hit something softer than granite.

From over behind the giant granite boulders that were now Mort Moran's monument, a Winchester began cracking. Bullets hit the rocks and whined. Mattie's voice was hard and metallic:

"That's just to let you know I kin sight you, Curly. Step out from behind the rocks and fight. Step out or I'll kill you! Git at him, Lightnin'! I'm smokin' that bushwhacker out of his cover!"

Lightnin' Dave Carver saw Curly Bob walk out from behind his rocky shelter. Then Dave stepped out into the open to shoot it out with him. The sound of their two guns blended in a sharp, cracking roar that sounded through the crashing roll of thunder and lightning.

Dave felt the burning thud of a .30-30 bullet ripping his thigh. His right leg jerked and quivered, and he knew that he was falling. But he kept on shooting, levering his carbine, pulling the trigger. Shooting at the tall, well-made figure of Curly Bob like a man shooting at a swaying target.

Then his carbine was empty, and he dropped it to jerk his six-shooter. But he did not need it.

Curly Bob's long legs buckled at the knees. The carbine dropped from his hands. Blood spilled from his mouth as he pitched forward and rolled over and over down the slant until he lay within arm's reach of the dead body of Ike Culpepper.

Curly Bob was dead when Dave Carver crawled to him. Dave's leg had given way under him, and he had to crawl the distance.

The rain was slacking and the crash of thunder and lightning was fading away in the badlands. The sun rose like a blood-red blaze in a crimson-streaked dawn.

"Swallow some of this," Mattie said, holding the neck of a bottle against Dave's clenched teeth. "It's one on Mort Moran. The last of his bottle. He'd be proud to watch you drink it, Lightnin'."

There was a ride to make. Mattie led the way. Then Dave Carver. Mandy behind. They had to cross a mile or more of rocky country where the high cliffs narrowed until the rocky walls scraped their stirrups. There was perhaps a quarter mile of this narrow going. Then a sheer drop of eight or ten feet to the rocky bed of a creek below.

Mattie said that these three horses had been trained to take the jump. But because Dave was badly hurt the two women lowered him down with saddle ropes. Then Mattie jumped his horse down over the ledge to the creek below.

Lightnin' was only half conscious by that time.

The creek water revived him, but it seemed like eternity before they rode into a high-walled canyon. Through slitted, squinting, pain-blinded eyes Lightnin' Dave Carver saw a little log cabin and barn and a pole corral.

"This," he heard Mattie say, "is where I was born. Where I was raised. Where I lived alone after my mother died, and where my outlaw father was killed. There's grub cached here. Enough to hold us until Lightnin' is fit to travel on. Nobody knows the way in or out of here. We'll be safe."

So it was during those weeks that followed, while Mattie and her daughter nursed Lightnin' Dave Carver back to health and strength for the second time, that the man really got to know the woman and the girl he had fallen in love with.

"I was born here, Dave," Mattie said simply. "Outlawed parents. I got cheated out of the things that every girl on earth wants. Pretty clothes, decency, contact with other women, the love of a man without a price on his head. So I made up my mind that my daughter would have those advantages. God has been almighty kind to us. Mandy's a good girl, Dave. You're a decent, square-shooting man. You're made for one another. Take her to that ranch of yours in Arizona. And as the saying goes, live happy ever after."

"You're comin' with us, Mattie," Dave told her.

Mattie shook her handsome head. "No, Dave. I'm an outlaw. A renegade. I was born here. I'll be plenty content knowing that you and Mandy are married and happy."

Lightnin' Dave Carver did not argue the matter. He knew better than to argue with Mattie Moran.

Mattie showed up one day with Shorty. She had cut his sign in the badlands. He said that the cattlemen had wiped out the rustlers to the last man. That he was the only one left. The two other outlaws belonging to the Dave Carver gang had been killed either by Curly Bob or Ike Culpepper that night of the fight.

Mattie gave Shorty a roll of money and told him to head for Mexico or South America. He shook hands with them and pulled out. They never saw him again.

It was about two months after the escape from the badlands country that Lightnin' Dave Carver walked into the U. S. marshal's office at Kansas City. The grizzled law officer had long ago given him up for dead.

Dave Carver showed him the lightning-burned law star on his chest, and told his story.

"I want to make a dicker with you, sir," he told the marshal. "I've gotten back that eighty thousand dollars and a gunny sack full of gold and currency that adds up to twice that much. It's all the stolen money that was passed to Ike Culpepper. I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be able to turn that money over to the law, if it wasn't for Mattie Moran and her daughter Mandy.

"I left that money with them," Dave continued. "When the law gives Mattie Moran and her daughter their freedom and the right to live like other women, I'll turn that money over to you."

"Otherwise?"

"Otherwise," said Dave Carver quietly, "it's our South American stake, and to the devil with your law."

The U. S. marshal hid a faint grin behind the palm of his hand. There was a twinkle in his hard, bright-blue eyes as he said:

"The lightning put the law brand on you, son. It's there for keeps. Catch the next train for Wyoming. Fetch Mattie Moran and her daughter here. I think that there is a woman I'd be mighty proud to shake hands with. The law will give you a wedding blow-out that you'll remember. And when that money is turned over to me, the bonus you'll get, along with the reward money on the Carver gang, will run into a real cowman's stake. Do you mind if I call in the boys? I want you to show 'em that lightnin'-branded law badge on your chest. By Satan, Dave Carver, you belong to this law outfit for life!"

Lightnin' Dave Carver went back to the hidden ranch in Wyoming. When he told Mattie and Mandy what the U. S. marshal had said, Mandy hugged and kissed him. And for the first time in her life, Mattie actualy cried.

That evening at sunset they rode out of the badlands. The red sun painted the rocky cliffs and peaks with vivid color. Not a cloud marred the evening sky.

Mandy and Dave rode on ahead, their stirrups touching. While Mattie took one last look at the broken, wild, outlaw badlands she was seeing for the last time.

Slowly she unbuckled her filled cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter. Then she took her carbine from its saddle scabbard. Leaning from her saddle, she dropped them down into the deep rocky gorge into the Black River.

Then she took off her hat. Her smoke gray-black eyes welled with tears and her lips moved stiffly:

"Our Father Who art in Heaven—"

After a while she rode on to catch up with Mandy and Lightnin' Dave Carver. Together they rode into their new life. A life outside and beyond the outlaw badlands.

THE END.

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by Rod Patterson

Would blasting guns decide whether the weary, drought-stricken homesteaders of Fossil Valley had to bow to the

CODE OF THE GARLANDS

I.

Posted on the gallery of the Totem House, Jim Garland smoked and watched the people of Dobe Wells go by. It was midafternoon and the sun which had risen red and burning over the plains that morning, had now turned to glaring white.

Worry hardened Jim Garland's mouth, for back in the blue hills to the south of town lay his two thousand acres of burned-out grazing range. He shifted his big frame restlessly, staring with a troubled gravity into the glare-white heat haze of the town.

He rolled the sleeves of his heavy woolen shirt above the elbows of his bronzed arms, his high, blunt cheekbones pressing tightly against the sun-roughened skin of his square, rather grim face.

Jim Garland had never known such heat as this in all his years here in Fossil Valley. It sucked the moisture from a man's bones—sapped his vitality. For a month now, this drought had lain upon the land like some invisible but destructive monster. It scorched the grama and burned the crops, avidly lapped up stream and river, leaving salt-white scars where clear water had once coursed. Jim had watched his cattle bawling fretfully around the *charcos*, had seen his bulls and dry cows nibble petulantly at the charred clumps of bunch grass, losing tallow by the hour.

Troubled in every thought, Jim absently noted

the first families of homesteaders begin to arrive from Blood River Basin for the customary Saturday-evening marketing. Bridle rings and pole chains set up a jangling along the street, and wagon wheels lifted and dropped thin cascades of yellow, powdery dust. These dry-land farmers, he mused half pityingly, were a sorry, bedraggled-looking lot at best, but since the drought had come, they had begun to seem more like animals than men. They reminded Jim of coyotes on the prowl.

Vaguely Jim observed a small knot of these grangers beginning to congregate across the square, in front of Herb Breyerly's General Store. And, for the first time, he smelled trouble on the wind—the trouble he had long dreaded. Suddenly he realized that the sullen, haggard eyes of those men were turned toward the hotel. He caught the low mutter of their voices, like the distant murmur of summer thunder. The fools! The poor damn fools!

Were they trying to threaten him—Jim Garland? The man who had been born and raised in this land? The man whose inalienable rights had so far never been challenged? With mounting anger, Jim stared at the crowd.

And then he swung his gaze to the hotel's front door. Harvey Dunlop, the owner, had just stepped out on the gallery and was coming toward him. The hotelkeeper's ruddy, perspiring face showed a friendly, though strained grin. "Say, Jim," he said matter-of-factly, "if I was you I'd get my hoss and hit fer home pronto. Them plow chasers're fixin' fer a ruckus, sure as hell!"

Jim shrugged. "They ain't got nerve enough to try anything."

"It's that dam you built up on Easter Creek," Dunlop explained in a worried voice. "Since you closed the locks there ain't enough water runnin' over that spillway o' yours to wet a blasted whistle with. 'Course I savvy you had to do it to protect your herd, but when these folks know your catch basin's got enough water in it to flood the Flats, they jest naturally figure you're trying to hold out on 'em. You better git goin', Jim."

Jim shook his head impatiently. "Never run my boot heels over yet side-steppin' a fight, Harve. Let 'em try to start something."

"Walt Driscoll's in town with his daughter," the hotel man told him. "An' if I know that ol' mossy horn, he'll mosey over here an' lay the whole thing plumb in your lap."

"Let him come," Jim said. "I'm ready."

Dunlop heaved a sigh, then turned and went back into the hotel's barroom without another word. Jim returned his gaze to the square, and now he saw that the homesteaders were forming a kind of ragged phalanx, as if to concentrate their forces for an advance. On him—Jim Garland? It certainly looked that way now, Jim thought.

A moment later Jim knew Harve Dunlop's perturbation had been well founded, that the homesteaders were, after all, spoiling for a fight. For—and the legs of his chair hit the floor a quick rap—he saw the crowd suddenly surge forward toward the hotel. Loud voices lifted in the square. They grew louder and louder as the grangers came on slowly, indomitably. And now Jim could see their faces, heat toughened, grimly resolute, beneath their big-brimmed hats.

At this point, two men elbowed their way to the front of the crowd, belligerently taking the lead. With a start, Jim recognized those two. The tall one with the hard face was Bill Carran, operator of the local land office, the other, Max Gannong, a chunky-shouldered man with a face that was pock-marked and furtive.

Jim remained at ease as the throng pushed across the boardwalk and came to a halt in front of the hotel's gallery. Swaggering up to the rail, Carran leaned against it, staring insolently into the face of the young cowman who waited so quietly there against the wall.

"About that dam of yours, Garland," Carran said, in a loud, clear tone. "We're gonna give you till sundown to open it up."

Sitting back in his chair, Jim spoke, not angrily; just quietly, reasonably: "It's no go, Carran. And you can holler your heads off. That water stays where it is."

"We'll blow your dam to hell!" snarled the real-estate man.

"Carran," Jim said evenly, "are you a fool as well as a thief?"

The agent reared back, and his coat fell away to show the heavy Colt pistol on his belt. "See here, Garland, I've stood fer all the hooraw from you I'm gonna, I'll—"

"I called you a crook," Jim said bluntly. "The remark still stands."

Carran's dark face turned turkey-red; his mouth stretched thin and he gripped the gallery railing. "Come down here and say that again, Garland," he said in a surly voice. "I'll show—"

Jim cut him off. "You're wastin' breath and energy, Carran. And you'll need both when your friends, here, begin to savvy what a crooked deal you ran on 'em when you soaked 'em fifteen dollars an acre for that Blood River land."

"Why, you—"

Jim cut him off again. "What I mean is: you and Gannong are as slick a pair of sidewinders as ever made tracks in sand. I mean you got these people to come out here where they wasn't wanted and then got 'em to put their hard cash into land that gets drier'n the hotbed of hell every year or

two! And I mean you're tryin' now to save your dirty hides by passin' the buck to me!"

Silence drew out thin and tight, lengthened unbearably. Carran's dark face became a mask of fury; his big fists clamped tight on the gallery railing. And then, suddenly, he said softly: "Just step down here, Garland, while I ram that down down your throat."

Jim laughed. Standing up, he dropped the cigarette he had been smoking and crushed it deliberately under his heel. Then he dusted his hands, swung a leg over the railing and dropped quickly to the walk. He faced Carran and Gennong, arms now held stiff against his sides.

The crowd hurriedly began to drift to right and left, reforming in a sweeping half circle around the three men. The eyes of every hard-bitten homesteader were filled with an alert interest, a definite eagerness.

Carran braced himself, his pale eyes cold with hate. But his gaze was hard and steady on the cowman's face. Gannong, at his side, said with heavy irony: "He's bluffin', Bill . . . just bluffin'."

Jim Garland said in his low, soft voice: "Put up your hands, Carran." Then: "I called you a thief once. I'll say it again."

Carran fell back, at the same moment clawing down for his gun. But he never made his draw. Jim's lunge rocked him back on his heels. They were three bulky shapes there in the hotel's hot shadow—and then those shapes suddenly became a single whipping blur of motion. Jim Garland's arms lifted and fell like pistons. Thudding blows echoed against the silence, and Max Gannong yelled out his unexpected pain.

Carran stumbled backward, knocked off balance by Jim's savage jab, then hurled himself forward with a wild cry, clawing desperately for a hold, and Jim pulled back and then smashed out with a roundhouse swing that rattled the agent's teeth and threw him off his feet, down under the boots of the silent crowd.

Jim brushed the sweat from his cheeks. For a moment he hovered over the knocked-out Carran, ignoring Gannong who had already faded back in the crowd out of range of the big rancher's flailing fists. A sardonic grin turned the corners of Jim's mouth as he slowly stared around him.

"Anybody else care to see how that'd feel?" he asked in his dry, soft drawl.

There was a sudden commotion in back of the crowd and a man's voice called out irritably: "What's this . . . what's this? One side, boys, an' let me pass!"

And then Jim saw the wide, flat shoulders of Walt Driscoll lifting and falling in the crowd. He leaned back against the railing and waited for the leader of the farmers to come up. When Driscoll finally broke through the ranks of the crowd and stopped in front of him, Jim lifted an arm in a casual greeting.

"Better call off your dogs, Driscoll," he advised. "Guess that'll be about all for today."

"Wait a minute!" The old granger, who had evidently been watching the finish of the fight from the stoop of Breyerly's Store, now faced the cowman squarely, his blunt, beard-stubbled jaw thrust out angrily. "This ain't finished, Garland. Not any!"

Jim gave him a wry smile. "Far as I'm concerned it is, Driscoll."

"I want to know what you aim to do about that Easter Creek dam of yours?" rasped Driscoll.

"Told you last week it's no good you badgerin' me about that, Driscoll," Jim said in a clipped voice. "Have I got to send you a letter before you and your friends savvy I mean it?"

The trouble was, Jim thought grimly, these people didn't know when they were licked. And they didn't realize that, after all, they were aliens in this land. No one except Bill Carran and Max Gannong had invited them to settle in Fossil Valley with their mangy mules and plows and dirty-faced, squalling kids.

There was one important rule for a man to follow in this country if he wanted to survive: he must show no pity, grant no favor, because he could expect no consideration from anybody else. It was every man for himself—and the devil take the hindmost! A man stood or fell by the measure of the fight he made!

And it wasn't, Jim reasoned, that he hated these homesteaders of Blood River Basin. He hated no man—least of all these miserable, half-starved grangers. But the Garland way had been to rule by power. That had been the code of the Garlands for three long generations, and Jim was proud of that record. It stood for honesty and sweat and two-fisted aggressiveness. Spade Ranch and its two thousand head of long-horned steers was the Garland trade-mark of success. All these things had been passed on to him by his forebears, and he, Jim Garland, could do no more, no less, than to try to deserve them and to justify that trust.

That was the reason he had, from the first, distrusted the farmers who had been baited by Carran to Fossil Valley, two years before. These ragged grangers, straddling a furrow, looked at a mule's tail all day long and contributed nothing at all to the land. They scratched the soil and planted their seed, and took something away, but never did they pay it back.

Now, standing stiffly in front of Walt Driscoll and the crowd, Jim said: "I warned you there'd be a bullet waitin' fer the first man I catch tryin'

to tamper with that dam of mine. I'm sayin' it once more, so you *all* can hear it."

Driscoll brushed it aside, but the mounting color in his proud face revealed the anger that now was sweeping him. "You're not a big enough fool to stick to that threat, Garland," he declared hotly. "Why, hell's bells, man, we're a hundred to one agin' you . . . even countin' in what little help you c'n round up to side you! Now, you listen to what I got to say." He braced back his shoulders, eying Jim sternly. "Us homesteaders don't propose to jest stand by idle an' see you ruin us, Garland. We'll take things into our own hands if you continue to block us. Blood River's drier'n chalk, our potatoes're baked in the ground. Corn's done fer, wheat an' rye an' alfalfa all set to go up in smoke first spark hits 'er." He thrust out a horny hand, made a quick down-slapping gesture with it. "All you got to do, Garland, to change everything, is to open up that spillway on your dam for three hours, three times a week, till rain comes. You'll still have plenty o' water fer your herd, an' there's jest a chance it may save at least part of our crops."

Jim's eyes were patient, full of genuine pity. "It sure is too bad, Driscoll," he said quietly. "Because you might be right. But I can't take the chance. I got two thousand head of beef out there on Dogie Flats, friend, and they come first, no matter what happens to you dry landers." He shrugged regretfully. "There's a fortune in this country for the man that's got guts enough to fight for it. But, you hoe-men— Well, the sooner you people wake up, the better. Why don't you pack up and pull your freight? This here is no land for sod busters!"

Blood stormed up into Walt Driscoll's face. His voice shook with rage as he answered Jim. "Mebbe we *are* fools, like you been callin' us lately, Garland. But at least we ain't cowards 'n' quitters. An' we c'n fight as good as you, any day. We need water . . . all of us down in Calamity Gulch. And, by thunder, we're gonna git it!"

II.

The crowd in front of the Totem House began to disperse, and Jim wheeled and entered the barroom for a drink. When he came out again, about twenty minutes later, the street was practically deserted. Jim paused a moment in the slanting sunlight, head bent in thought. And, glancing up, he saw Walt Driscoll's daughter, Anne, swing along the square and enter Breyerly's Store.

Jim stirred restlessly. He hadn't been able to figure this girl out yet, and on occasions such as this when they had happened to be in town at the same time, she had had a strange effect upon him. He'd noticed her interest in him, too, by the way she looked at him when she thought he hadn't seen her. And he realized that they were both uncomfortable in each other's presence because of a strange emotion that held them apart—an emotion undefinable to either of them. It was a kinship of two stubborn people, who would not move toward each other. And this strong pull and this definite antagonism was an unavoidable conflict—and was accepted as such by them both.

Jim screwed up his courage, however, and was waiting in front of the store when Anne came out a little while later and saw him. He took off his hat and moved toward her, realizing with a twinge of dry humor that he didn't know what he was going to say to her.

Anne met him in the middle of the walk and stopped, looking questioningly into his eyes, a queer, half-angry expression in her own dark-blue ones. She stood there, tall and straight, one hand holding back her dark curls which the hot wind was blowing. She spoke at last, slowly and in a low, clear tone: "Well, Jim Garland, I reckon you must feel pretty proud of yourself."

Hardly aware that he was answering, Jim said: "Not proud, Anne. Honestly sorry that I can't do anything to help your folks. You see, I'm going to need every drop of water I've impounded at Easter Creek. This dry spell may last another month yet, and I can't take the risk of losing my herd."

He paused, unaccountably embarrassed and the girl said quietly: "I guess you don't ever think much about anybody but yourself."

Irritation made his tone quick and hard. "That ain't the point, Anne. I inherited Spade from my father when I was fifteen years old, and I've run the ranch practically single-handed ever since. I've fought for it more'n once, and I've known what it means to go hungry, too."

She was frowning. "You're narrow. And selfish."

"Maybe," Jim admitted bluntly. "But I'm aimin' to hold on to what's mine. Nobody ever gave *me* a helpin' hand when I needed it."

"But you don't really own anything except the ground your ranch buildings stand on, Jim. The rest is free range. Others have to live, too. Didn't you ever think of that?"

"Nobody asked you homesteaders to come out here," he went on doggedly. "But you came, and now you're fencin' in the range, spoilin' it for us ranchers."

"Wait!" As Anne Driscoll spoke, her eyes darkened from the bitter things she was remembering. She was standing a little closer to him now, and he saw the smooth curve of her throat. The faint, elusive perfume of her hair cut through the thick,

dusty odors of the street. Her breathing came quicker, and her dark eyes were shining and unhappy and full of angry spirit. "We need water. We will get water. There are laws," she said tightly.

"The laws are all on my side," Jim reminded with some effort. "I've got pre-emption rights to Easter Creek, don't forget."

"You haven't seen our withering crops," she shot back at him. "You haven't even bothered to ride out and see for yourself what suffering and ruin is coming to my people."

The truculence left his tone, and he smiled. "You know, I think I *will* ride out to Calamity Gulch," he said softly.

Two spots of color showed suddenly on Anne's cheeks, but she met his steady gaze unflinchingly. He liked this girl's straight, fearless talk, and even as he realized that she held him more or less in scorn, as her people did, he knew that she was also trying to curb this other strong pull—the interest he had for her. He tried to fathom his own emotions: why he was so irresistibly attracted to her. He failed—and was troubled by this failure.

"I'll ride out to your place tonight," he said.

Anne Driscoll considered him with her steady, fearless glance. "I hope you've decency enough to keep your word," she said and walked abruptly away from him.

Jim Garland waited until she had disappeared into the store, then went on up the street to Mulvaney's Livery Stable. He took out his buckskin mare and saddled it and, a little while later, rode slowly out of town. Here and there on the prairie's lonesome flatness homesteaders' low-lying, shake-roofed shacks made a blurred huddle beneath a smothering heat haze that seemed to grow thicker against the horizon, like the boil up of fire smoke.

It was a relief when, about a half-hour later, Jim saw the long log buildings of Spade, his ranch on the rim of the Yellow Hills. He slanted his hat against the almost horizontal rays of the sun, and pushed the buckskin on until he topped a rise, then dropped immediately down into a wide, wire-inclosed yard.

Skid Cassidy, Spade's red-haired foreman, met Jim as he dismounted by the noisily squeaking windmill. Cassidy was a first-class hand, but it was hard for him to keep a job due to an inordinate fondness for looking on the wine when it was red. Jim, however, liked the man and so had kept him on in spite of his frequent defections from duty.

Jim handed Skid the reins. "Anybody blowed up our dam yet?" he asked the foreman jokingly.

"Blame near it!" Skid declared heatedly. "An' now we're short-handed, boss. Reb an' Scotty jest asked for their time, Jim, an' I had to give it to 'em."

Jim looked up sharply. "I'll talk to the boys," he said.

"You can't," Skid retorted. "They've gone a'ready."

"What happened?"

The foreman scrubbed a freckled hand through his sorrel-colored hair. "Well, it's thisaway, Jim. Somebody was takin' pot shots at them boys all afternoon. They was up on the spillway like you said, sort o' watchin' out fer things, when this here party started bangin' away from the bresh t'other side o' Devil's Slide. Purty soon it got too dang hot fer 'em there in the open, an' Reb an' Scotty almost killed their horses gettin' in to report. Well, I went back there with the boys an', by Satan, that *orejana*'d opened up the valve and the water was pourin' down the spillway like it was a cloudburst!"

Jim frowned. He glanced toward the ridge behind which lay the dam, hidden by mesquite and chaparral. "Did you get the man?"

The foreman shook his head. "We had a right good chance to get that party, though, but held our fire jest in the nick o' time. That hombre wa'n't no hombre, nohow. 'Twas a kid. A gal!"

Jim started. "A girl!"

Skid nodded. "'Bout sixteen years old, I'd say, an'-dressed in a man's duds. Short black hair, she had, too, like a boy's."

"You positive it was a girl, Skid? Maybe—"

"It was a gal, sure enough," the foreman insisted. "She yelled at us like a blasted Comanche Injun an' thumbed her nose at us, then hopped on her crow bait an' lit out toward the gulch like a jack-rabbit toppin' a hill!"

Jim considered the foreman's information gravely for a moment, then said: "Toward the gulch, huh?"

Skid nodded. "Reb an' Scotty allowed as how they'd ruther quit than take chances on pluggin' a female crittur. Said they hadn't hired out as no doggone gunhands, anyhow."

Jim's forehead was ridged by a troubled frown. "The herd bein' watched?"

"I had Pete and Slim bunch 'em down on Dogie Flats, three mile below the dam. Them bottoms is about all the decent graze left now . . . an' 'twon't be long 'fore that'll be gone, too. Lessn we git some rain or you let a little water from the dam down there."

"Open the locks for a half-hour, and have Pete mount guard on the dam tonight," Jim said. "Slim can night-herd the cows." He started up toward the house. "I'm ridin' over to Calamity Gulch after I have a bite to eat."

Skid Cassidy's gasp of surprise followed on the

heels of that announcement, but Jim kept on, a moment later entering the house. He changed his sweaty clothes, washed up and made a light snack in the pantry just off the big, beam-studded kitchen. Then, about an hour before dusk, he saddled a fresh horse and headed it for Calamity Gulch.

The Driscoll homestead lay about five miles from Spade on the outskirts of Calamity Gulch, the neatly laid-out settlement of a score or so slab-sided cabins on the bank of the bone-dry Blood River.

Riding slowly along the winding trail, Jim let his gaze travel over the fields ahead of him. Potato vines lay limp and blackened on all sides, corn lifted white stalks in even rows, stalks that rattled in the hot wind like saber blades. Jim's thought was: *These grangers are in a tight—no doubt of that!* He pulled his glance away from the ruin and doggedly held it on the trail.

Finally he rode into the little fenced-in yard of the Driscoll homestead. He had a full awareness of his danger at this moment, for he himself was in foreign territory now. And he had no illusions as to what would happen if any of the grangers discovered him here and chose to make an issue of it.

Leaving the horse at the corner of the cabin, Jim walked to the rear door and knocked briskly on the rough panel. There was no answer. After a minute or so he tried again and then walked in, calling: "Driscoll, it's me . . . Jim Garland!"

There was an odor of cooking in the kitchen, and the heat of the day was heavy in the little clean-scrubbed room. Jim stepped to a low door, leading into the front part of the house, calling again. The room he had just entered seemed to be waiting—the two leather-covered easy-chairs, the sofa with its star-patterned spread, the old-fashioned hooked rugs and the table with three places set for supper.

Jim was about to sit down in one of the chairs when swift footfalls sounded at the kitchen door. He crossed back into the kitchen just as Anne Driscoll came in with an armful of withered-looking ears of corn. She showed no surprise at finding him there. Putting the corn on the center table, she said: "I saw your horse. Dad's up the road talking to the Tuckers. I asked him not to say anything about you coming here. He'll be back soon."

She was wearing a white, freshly laundered linen dress with very short sleeves, and her bare, firm arms were a rich tan against the white. She stood there in front of him, chin lifted, a look that was deep and obscure in her blue eyes.

"So you did keep your word?" she said finally. Then, in a low, rather husky tone: "Jim, what is it that makes you so different from other men? Why do you fight alone this way . . . against us?"

He looked at her. Why should he bother trying to explain anything to this girl? He'd already been foolish enough to try to tell her how he felt, why he believed that a man had to stand alone—had to make his own fight, regardless of who was hurt on the side lines.

"A man takes what he wants," he said shortly. "And holds it, if he can."

They stood that way for a long moment, close together, silent, keenly aware of each other—both suddenly conscious that they were alone here in this house.

"Guess I . . . I'm a bit early," Jim said awkwardly. "But I wanted to see what the heat had done to your crops."

Anne leaned a little away from him. The violet light in her eyes fascinated Jim, and even in the half light of the room he could see the wistful, almost inviting curve of her red mouth. He moved suddenly against her and felt her hand come up quickly to his chest. Then that arm gave under the force of his body and her head fell back against his arm as he kissed her.

Anne pulled away from him, suddenly, angrily—and then she raised her hand and slapped him stingingly on the mouth. And that was the moment Jim heard Walt Driscoll out in the yard, talking to someone. The old man's voice rumbled nearer as he approached the house.

Standing there stiffly in front of Jim, Anne spoke in a voice that shook with anger. "Well, you took what you wanted again . . . but I'm one thing you'll never hold!"

Jim's mouth still smarted from her blow. "Maybe not," he said. "And then again, maybe I will."

Walt Driscoll came stamping into the kitchen then, and he stopped just inside the door, staring through the gloom at Jim, his gray-streaked head thrown back. "You better get out, Garland," he said curtly. "Some o' the boys're headin' this way. If they find you in the gulch—" He didn't finish it, but made his familiar short, down-slapping gesture.

Jim didn't answer. He was staring at the figure which had suddenly appeared in the open door behind the old homesteader. It was the figure of a young girl, but she was not dressed in girl's clothing. She was bare-footed, and she was wearing a boy's outfit of blue jeans and checkered shirt. Her hair was black and close cropped, and she had a pert pug nose with a band of freckles on it. She seemed as much astonished at seeing Jim there as he was at seeing her, and she came forward into the room, staring defiantly up into his face.

"Well," she threw at him, "what're you gawpin' at, mister?"

Anne cut in: "This is my sister, Judy. Judy, meet Jim Garland."

Judy Driscoll braced her bare feet wide apart. "I know him," she flung out scornfully. "You don't have to tell me." She whirled on her father. "What's this? What's he doin' in our house, pa? Why don't you get him out of here?"

"All right, Judy," Driscoll said to the girl. Then, to Jim: "Better light a shuck, Garland. I won't be responsible for what may happen."

Anne spoke. "I asked him to ride over to see what he's doing to us by holding that water back, dad. But I made a mistake I guess. He took me up wrong." Then, with biting sarcasm: "He seems to think I just wanted him to come to see *me!*"

Jim shrugged. "Seems like we both made a mistake," he said with a wry, hard grin, and moved slowly toward the door. There, he turned around and pointed a finger at Judy Driscoll. "Listen, rabbit," he said softly, "you better be careful how you ride around Spade. Some day you may . . . get your little feet wet." He glanced briefly at Anne's set face and nodded shortly. "Good night," he said and, turning, walked out into the yard without another word.

When he reached the corner of the cabin and his horse, however, he received a shock that brought him to a sudden halt. Two men whom he did not know suddenly stepped from the shadows and confronted him, guns drawn. One of the men spoke in a way that was like the pronouncement of law. "Garland, this is a last warnin'. Stay away from the gulch or take the consequences."

"That'll hold good for keeps," his companion added, "lessn you open up that dam."

Jim stared. "That'll never happen," he said flatly, "so we won't even talk about it."

"That dam ain't on your land, Garland," said the first man.

"Never mind," Jim murmured. "You've been in this country long enough to know law is one thing and possession another. I've got possession, friend, and I won't allow any fool hoeman to try to dictate what I can do and what I can't do. Is that clear?"

"Yes, it is," the second speaker declared. "Now, git on your hoss, Garland, and shag out of here. An' if we ketch yuh hangin' 'round here ag'in, the devil help yuh! Is *that* clear?"

In the saddle, Jim turned out to the trail, stirred suddenly by a deep and personal resentment. He'd been a fool, no doubt of that. And it was pure luck that he hadn't gotten a bullet in the back tonight, for all his pains. But what was worse than anything, he'd dropped his guard enough to reveal to Anne Driscoll—he gripped the reins tightly—what she meant to him. And then, abruptly, a twinge of doubt stabbed through him. Could it be, after all, that these homesteaders were right and he was wrong? Was he really sacrificing their interests, maybe their very lives, to suit his own proud and selfish needs? Why, blast it, he must be going soft! Brushing these thoughts from his mind, he rode on in the deepening dusk.

Walt Driscoll's quarter section lay on Jim's left now, stretched away through the twilight to the rim of Dogie Flats where the Spade herd was bunched in the draws and washes below the Easter Creek dam. Except for a three-mile strip of drab green grama to the south of the dry creek bed, all this land lay burned and eroded and ruined beneath the summer's incredible sun.

The narrow, slotlike irrigation ditches here were like gaping, unhealed wounds in the hard-baked earth. The sweeping, undulating acres of winter wheat made a stunted stand as far as Jim could see, the grain tops already turned a charred black, tinder dry, dangerously inflammable. Jim pushed on, seeing nothing here but dismal waste and heartbreaking disaster.

III.

When Jim Garland reached Spade Ranch, he didn't unsaddle his horse, but tethered it at the cast-iron water trough beside the windmill, at the edge of the peeled-pole corrals. Still aware of those dim, small voices that nagged him from within, he walked to the veranda of the house and sat down to smoke his first cigarette since late afternoon.

And now his thoughts turned to his own problems. Reb and Scotty had quit, leaving only Pete Larson, Skid Cassidy and Slim Ott to handle the herd. Hardly more than a skeleton outfit, if the homesteaders should happen to make trouble for him. Well, tomorrow he'd have to see about hiring a couple of men in town. For trouble was sure to come, Jim knew now. Bill Carran and Max Gannong would keep prodding the grangers until they eventually broke into outright rebellion. And Jim was perfectly aware of the fact that Carran and Gannong had covetously kept their eyes on Spade for two years now. If they could somehow bring about his, Jim's ruin, they would then stand a good chance of obtaining control of the ranch and its water supply, later cutting it up into sections which they could lease or sell to the new inpouring of farmers which would be sure to follow.

Jim threw away his cigarette, after crushing it under his spurred heel with the slow deliberation of a man who made carefulness a habit. He stood up and stretched, then wandered out toward the bunkhouse at the edge of the yard. Halfway there, he called: "Skid, come here a minute!"

No answering hailoo came from the darkened bunkhouse. And then, with a start of alarm, Jim

heard the sound: the tinkling crash of breaking glass. He ran forward and hurled himself through the door of the bunkhouse. Instantly, he struck a match and, finding a nearby lamp, lit it. Then he whirled to stare around the bunk-lined room.

Skid Cassidy was there in front of him, swaying on his feet, his round, ruddy face twisted in a maudlin grin. "'Lo, boss," he babbled thickly, "you're jes' 'n time to h'ist one wi' me. Only, shucks, looks like I jes' busted the bottle!" He stared down stupidly at the smashed whiskey flask at his feet. "'S too bad, boss. Now I gotta—"

Jim moved forward deliberately and seized the foreman by the collar of his coat, shaking him until his teeth rattled. "So you double-crossed me just when I need you, huh?" Jim's cheeks were flattened with anger and despair. "By Tophet, Skid, I oughta bust you one!" He flung the man headlong into the nearest bunk, then stood there, glaring down at him. "Where'd you get that booze?" he demanded harshly. "Come on! Spit it out, Skid, 'fore I start takin' you apart!"

The foreman made an effort to stand on his feet, but collapsed on the bunk again, arms and legs sprawled out grotesquely. "Shucks, boss," he muttered, "frien' o' mine dropped in, th'ash all! Fella name o' Carran . . . Bill Carran. Ni'sh fella—"

Jim's face was like a mask. He stared coldly down at the foreman, not speaking. Finally he said: "You mean to tell me Carran had the gall to come here tonight and feed you whiskey?"

Skid made no reply. His head suddenly lolled forward and his mouth fell open and he slept.

A deep, grinding rage swept through Jim as he stood there staring at the unconscious foreman. And then he stiffened. For a quick burst of gunfire rolled across the stillness and the ground began to drum under flying hoofs. Jim whirled and raced out into the yard.

"Slim . . . Pete!" he yelled but got no answer from the region of the dam.

He hit the saddle running, rammed the horse down out of the yard and straight toward Dogie Flats where scattered shots now lifted from the vicinity of the held herd. A few minutes later, and riding at a stretching run, he roared out on the pitch-black plain. Through a fresh volley of firing he heard voices yelling, saw the tall shadows that were mounted men streaking along the earth.

The racket of the guns had spooked the herd and the steers were on the verge of stampeding. Pale lances of light stabbed the blackness. Guns flashed and faded and flashed again, and these, Jim knew, were the guns of Bill Carran, Max Gannong and the homesteaders laying panic on the herd.

And now Pete Larson and Slim Ott, the kid, were riding up and Jim yelled, "Give it to 'em, boys! Shoot to kill!"

They swung away together and rushed on, spurring their horses into the wild mêlée. The frightened bawling of the steers and the clashing of horn against horn mingled in a weird crescendo under the murky stars as Jim and his men cut around the edge of the milling herd.

Lead screamed around them and the attacking homesteaders wheeled in the background and began to turn the far edge of the beef, pressing it toward Jim and the men who rode with him. The hoofs of a thousand crazed cattle thundered over the hard-packed ground. Dust and gun smoke swirled in a choking cloud above the earth.

"Come on, boys," Jim called. "Give it to 'em!"—and rushed on, his six-gun roaring as he laid his sights on a vague shape squarely in front of him and let go point-blank. The dim, wheeling shapes of other men loomed up from the side of the herd. Red-eyed steers pitched past Jim and his horse bucked against the tremendous pressure of their close-packed bodies.

Suddenly a rider burst out of the murk and Jim recognized the squat form of Max Gannong. Instantaneously Gannong fired, and Jim heard the vicious *z-z-zing* of the bullet past his cheek. But he plunged hard at the man, and Gannong flashed by and lunged away, disappearing into the gloom.

It was all over suddenly, and the beat of horses' hoofs diminished, finally fading away to the north. Jim knew that Carran and Gannong had failed in their attempt to stampede the herd and were leading their men in retreat. The Spade men managed at last to quiet the steers, but Jim's mind was weighted with worry and presently he rode back toward the ranch. A quarter mile from it, however, he reined down abruptly, every nerve straining. And then he heard it: the far sound of water falling over rock! With a muttered oath, he raked his spurs and flogged the horse across the low red hill shoulders toward the dam.

A moment later the catch basin came in sight, its wide expanse of quiet water gleaming like quicksilver under the pale starlight. Jim left his horse at the edge of the creek. Fifty yards upstream he could make out the gray framework of the twenty-foot dam standing like the grim superstructure of a gallows against the sky. At its base against the opposite bank water was boiling whitely, and that water was rushing down grade past Jim toward the open flats and the withered wheat fields of the homesteaders.

Slipping and sliding down the bank, Jim plunged into the stream. The current took hold of him and pulled at his legs like treacherous, clawing hands. He stumbled on, gun held high as the water crawled hungrily to his waist. And then he was clambering up the far bank, hurrying toward the

big iron wheel that controlled the locks. Suddenly it came to him that Bill Carran must have been here and opened the valve after first making sure that Skid Cassidy was drunk and safely out of the way.

Reaching the wheel, Jim took hold of it with both hands and spun it slowly, fighting the clanking gears. Almost at once the locks closed and the boiling rumble of water ceased.

Jim turned and started down toward the bank of the creek. But he brought up short, staring apprehensively through the shadows. In his haste to reach the valve wheel he had missed something. But now he saw it: a huddled shape against the parapet of the dam, a dozen yards from the lock machinery. Cautiously, he inched his way forward, then bent slowly and touched the thing. It was a human body and—Jim gasped out in sudden horror, and, at the same instant, turned the limp form over on its back. All the breath gusted out of him as he stared down into the still, white face of—*Judy Driscoll!*

IV.

In his dingy office at Dobe Wells, Hamlin McNair, surgeon and medical examiner of Fossil County, confronted a grim-faced cowman.

"You're in a tight and no mistake, Garland," he said soberly. "Judy Driscoll was killed by a bullet from a Colt .44, all right. She was shot from behind; the slug punctured the right ventricle."

Jim Garland drew a hand over his sweat-streaked forehead and tried to think clearly. "Doc," he announced finally, "I know who done it as sure as though I'd seen the whole thing, but I can't prove a thing on this party except that he was at Spade about a half-hour before that bunch from the gulch tried to stampede my herd."

Doc McNair shook his gray head, his keen eyes fixed gravely on the other's haggard face. "*I* believe you, Garland, but that's no assurance the sheriff will—or this poor youngster's people. You got word to 'em yet?"

Jim gave a despairing shrug. "No, not yet, doc. I . . . I can't bear to face 'em. And yet I got to. Tonight."

"Who's the hombre you suspect?"

"Bill Carran!" Jim let the name fall from his lips with savage bitterness. "He wasn't ridin' with Gannong durin' the raid on my cattle, so he must've been at the dam."

"Hm-m-m." The doctor's bearded lips tightened. There was a long moment of silence, and then he said: "You may be right, Garland, but you'll have to prove it. I always did think Carran was a skunk. Listen"—he dropped an assuring hand on Jim's shoulder—"you better ride on home while I send somebody out to the gulch to break the news to Walt and Anne. There's no call for any more gunplay around here tonight, and there's bound to be if you bust into the gulch at this time."

Jim flattened his hands in front of him. "No," he decided in a flat, stubborn voice. "I . . . I found the kid. It's my place to tell Driscoll and try to explain things to him."

Doc McNair made a brief gesture of assent. "All right. But I think you're loco to try it. I'll see Sheriff Mossman in the morning, when he gets back from Yoakum, but you'd better make it a point to be here, too, Garland."

Jim turned and walked out to the darkened street. But he did not go at once to the team and buckboard he had driven into Dobe Wells an hour before. Instead, he headed deliberately across the square toward the bar of the Totem House. As he cut across the dusty street, he noted that six saddle horses stood at the hotel's tie rail.

Entering the barroom a moment later, Jim stopped just inside the door, letting his somber gaze swing quickly around the smoky room. He saw Judd Lankerwell and Tom McCrory, two renegade homesteaders, at the far end of the bar, standing shoulder to shoulder. But there were two other men behind those two, unfamiliar to him. Jim noted their hard, bleak faces, the tied-down guns. These were gunmen hired by Carran, definitely cat-eyed killers from the brush country north of Blood River Basin!

And then Jim spotted Bill Carran and Max Gannong. The real-estate agent was slouched casually at a faro table on his right, a cigarette caught between his long, loose lips, one hairy hand draped over the table's edge just above the black butt of his gun. Gannong sat opposite him, head lowered, pale eyes fixed on the table's green baize top.

Jim looked at Harvey Dunlop who was tending bar. "How long have these hombres been here, Harve?" he demanded.

Dunlop dried a glass with his usual deliberation. "Not long," he said briefly. "Why?"

"An hour?"

"They ain't been *here* that long." The hotelkeeper's glance went to Carran and Gannong, then came back to Jim. "But them two at the table've been in town since half past eight."

Jim's gaze settled on the expressionless face of the real-estate agent. "Carran," he stated with a sudden hard flatness, "you killed Judy Driscoll!"

The silence that fell was complete, and no one stepping into this room could possibly have mistaken the meaning of its taut expectancy. Carran's mouth drew long and thin, and Jim watched his eyes contract, as a cat's close to vertical slits in a strong light.

"Some day the fool killer's gonna git you, Garland," Carran said. He leaned forward slowly and added in a surly, rasping voice: "If that kid's dead, you or one o' your men prob'ly killed her. Mebbe you caught her meddlin' around your dam."

Jim's eyes narrowed. "How'd you know I found Judy Driscoll at the dam?"

Carran reddened. He was a man with a sluggish mind and no quickness of tongue, and now he realized too late that he had fallen into a trap of his own baiting. Jim's sharpness infuriated him, but he brushed the remark aside with a quick down flick of his fist.

"Don't bother me," he said rancorously. "I'll say no more about it."

Jim's eyes continued to bore into him. "You killed Driscoll's girl," he repeated in a dead flat tone, "and now you're thinkin' the grangers'll pin the killin' on me. Well, you're wrong, mister. I can prove you was at Spade tonight at six o'clock, and I can prove Gannong was with your men when they tried to spook my herd on Dogie Flats."

Carran brushed the accusation aside with a shrug. "Go to the devil, Garland!" Then, in a soft, deadly voice: "You want some trouble, just keep on runnin' off your mouth." He gave a harsh laugh. "Why don't you stop talkin' an' make your play?"

"You got the usual crowd behind you, I see," Jim remarked. "Which one of your boys is gonna try to tackle me? Or is it the bunch of you together?"

"You can find that out," Carran said.

Jim stood still, arms pushed suddenly down at an angle from his sides.

And that was the moment that Carran lunged upright. His right arm broke hip-high and his gun seemed to flow from its holster. But he never pulled the trigger. For at that instant a new voice rapped out, "Hold everythin'!" from the door directly behind Jim's hunched-over shape.

The four men at the bar, guns arcing up, went suddenly motionless, those guns poised in midair. Jim took time to flick a glance over his shoulder and saw the ruddy face and bloodshot eyes of Skid Cassidy. The foreman, now nearly sober, stood in the opening, and he had a Winchester in his hands with the blue barrel covering the room impartially.

"Put away your irons, gents!" the foreman said. "One quiver out o' you antelopes an' by Jehoshaphat, I'll start dehornin' you!"

Skid's unexpected entrance knocked Carran's gunmen out of the play, placed Carran and Gannong squarely in the orbit of Jim Garland's low-held gun. It was a turn of affairs they hadn't figured on, making the risk too big for either man to take. One of them would be bound to go down with Jim's first shot—maybe both. Carran, white-faced, furious, motioned to Gannong and put away his own weapon, jamming it savagely back to leather. He stared balefully at Jim and said: "O.K., you win this round, Garland, but you better take care o' yourself." He was regaining some of his lost dignity, some of the self-confidence of a moment before. "You can't prove a thing agin' me. Matter o' fact, it's the other way around. You threatened to shoot the first man that tried to monkey with your dam. Don't forget that, friend."

Jim went to the door, then turned to face the room again. "We'll let the evidence speak for itself, Carran," he said. Then, to the foreman at his side: "Come on, Skid, we'll let these buckos stew in their own juice for a little while."

A half-hour later Jim Garland drove his buckboard up in front of the Driscoll homestead, having sent Skid Cassidy home, a chastened but vindicated man. Stepping down from the rig, Jim strode at once to the front door. As he waited, he became aware of lights to the north where the grangers' shacks made a gray huddle in the gulch. And he could hear the mumble of voices back in the shadows, voices that suddenly held the threat of violence to come. Jim realized at this moment that he must speak his message, must try to make the Driscolls understand and believe. And then he had to shake the dust of Calamity Gulch from his feet—quickly.

In response to Jim's second rap, the door opened, and Anne stood there in front of him. It struck him as a little odd that she showed no surprise at seeing him here. And then he saw that the girl had been weeping, that her eyes were tear-reddened, her face dead-white. She drew aside to let him come in.

Hat in hand, he faced her. And then Walt Driscoll's heavy voice boomed from the kitchen door. "We know about Judy, so you don't have to explain, Garland." Grief, despair, underlined the old man's words.

Jim looked at the girl, then at her father. "Then . . . then you don't believe I—"

Driscoll stopped him. "I ain't changed my mind about you, Garland," he said in a weary tone. "But I don't think you're low enough to shoot a little girl in the back."

Anne's low voice was barely audible. "Dad just came back from town," she said. "We know everything. Dr. McNair told dad."

Jim bent his head. He started to speak, but words suddenly failed him. What could he say? What could he do to help these people, now that they were crushed and beaten? And then he thought of Carran and Gannong, and his mouth was twisted with fury, his eyes like flame.

"You better git out, Garland," Driscoll said. "If our crowd hears o' this . . . about Judy, you're a dead man! Don't know why I'm botherin' my head

over someone like you, but—" He turned without finishing and stumbled blindly out into the yard.

It was only a moment later that Jim caught the far sound of voices again, heard the muffled yells of men, the rattle of many hoofs on the stony trail.

"Quick!" Anne gasped. "You've got to run for it, Jim!"

Walt Driscoll's voice yelled from outside in the yard. "Anne! Anne! Is Garland in there yet? Tell him to come out here . . . and hurry!"

Jim wheeled abruptly away from the girl and swung out into the yard. He ran across the yellow grass to Driscoll, standing stiffly in the shadows. The old man was pointing south toward Dogie Flats and the hills of Easter Creek. Following his finger, Jim saw far out across the darkened plains a reddish glow against the sky. And then he gasped out: "The wheat! Great guns, Driscoll, the valley's finished if that fire gets a start. We've got to do something!"

V.

"Wheat, hell!" Driscoll cried in a loud voice. "The wind's in the north, Garland! That fire is headin' straight fer your ranch!"

For the space of a heartbeat, Jim stood rigid, motionless. And then he choked out, *"Carran and Gannong . . . they started it!"*—and lunged away toward the front of the cabin. But, even as he ran, the glow on the southern horizon grew greater—the smudge of yellow smoke broadened and stabbing jets of orange flame shot upward into the sky.

Jim hit the seat of the buckboard, grabbed up the reins. He heard Driscoll's quick, "Wait, Garland!" and glanced around impatiently, seeing the old man there, one knob-knuckled hand clutching the iron guard rail of the seat.

"I can't wait, Driscoll," Jim said. "I'll see you later!"

But the old homesteader swung himself up beside Jim. "You got shovels and pickaxes up at your place?"

Jim nodded. And then, for the first time, it struck home that Driscoll meant to go with him. He stared at the old man, bewildered. "I'm not askin' you to come, Driscoll."

"You don't have to," Driscoll said. "You'll be needin' all the help you c'n git."

And then Anne was running up. "Hurry, Jim," she said breathlessly. "The Tuckers and the Marshals just found out you're here. They're right behind you!"

Jim whipped the horses forward, but as he flogged them into a run, for the moment he wasn't thinking of the fire that menaced Spade, or of the angry homesteaders on his back trail. He was thinking of Anne Driscoll and this silent, gaunt man in the seat beside him. They both despised him and yet, the way it appeared now, it had never occurred to either of them to let him drive to Spade alone.

In back of the careening buckboard, yells lifted suddenly, and Jim threw an apprehensive glance over his shoulders, seeing the tall shadows that were the homesteaders spurring along the trail a hundred yards away.

"That's Bob Tucker and his boys," Driscoll said tensely. "Joe Marshal and the rest'll be right behind 'em!"

And then other riders were racing out of the shadows all around the buckboard. Jim gripped the reins with sweaty hands, bracing himself for the clash he felt sure was coming now. But the mounted shapes wheeled and rushed past the buckboard, the hoofs of their horses drumming hard along the earth. Jim stared after them, unbelievingly. Why, these men were not trying to stop him, they were riding hell for leather in the same direction, toward the prairie fire!

At first when Jim saw the grangers pull away on the trail in front of him, he thought that these farmers were going to Easter Creek in case they had to protect their own land. And later, when he heard the thunder of hundreds of hoofs around him, he told himself bitterly that the people of Calamity Gulch had come out just to watch his ranch and herd go up in smoke.

But he was wrong. Sixty-odd grim-faced homesteaders on horseback, in wagons and buggies and ancient, creaking buckboards, all riding hell-bent toward Dogie Flats, must have another motive than gloating pleasure. And slowly, the realization came to Jim that there was something bigger, something deeper, which had brought these men out here. This was his, Jim Garland's personal disaster, and yet it was being met unquestioningly by a united front of men who hated him, men who had sworn vengeance and even death against him!

All this did not strike him at once. Rather, the conviction hit him by degrees and by a series of vivid and kaleidoscopic impressions. But the whole thing became clear at last when they reached Dogie Flats, a mile below the Easter Creek dam. The fire had started about three miles south of the flats in the open prairie and, in spite of a gentle wind against it, was inching north and west in the direction of Spade Ranch. Parched bunch grass and brittle sage fed the flames, and a blazing sheet of flame and smoke crackled and roared against the night.

The grangers left their horses and rigs at the rim of the hills and poured out onto the flats with shovels and picks to clear a firebreak on the edge

of the dry creek bottom. Jim's first thought was for the cattle, and he ran the team southward against the smoke and sparks for a half mile, reaching the point finally where the steers had been bunched two hours before. There was now no sign of the herd but suddenly Skid Cassidy rode out of the welter of smoke and flame to yell: "Herd's O. K., boss! Me 'n' the boys jest shagged 'em over in back o' Devil's Slide. They'll be safe there if we kin stop the fire!"

"We'll stop it!" Walt Driscoll bellowed, and Jim turned the buckboard and sent the team clattering back over the hummocky ground toward the creek.

Excitement and suddenly renewed hope whetted Jim's nerves when he reached the creek and saw the homesteaders fanned out across the flats in a ragged line, shoulders rising and falling as they frantically dug their picks and shovels in the hard-packed earth. Leaping from the buckboard, he ran forward, seeing his former enemies there before him in the smoke and dust. There was Ed Parnell, John Barnes, and Jules Ganter, three ring leaders of the farm faction. There were others—men Jim had never seen before. This was the picture that Jim saw—the picture he would never forget.

And then all hell broke loose on the flats. The flames, checked by the firebreak the grangers had, with almost magic speed, placed across the path of the fire, suddenly veered away to the north, racing along the ground toward the great, rolling fields of wheat across the creek. Nothing lay between those fields and the fire but the wide, barren bed of the stream with its occasional clumps of tinder-dry grass. It might take a half-hour for the flames to jump that bed, but the area was too great for the gang of farmers to cover in time.

Spade Ranch had been saved. But now the domain of the homesteaders was menaced. And, even as Jim swung his pick, he realized that the wind, too, had changed and now was blowing strongly from the south. In another twenty minutes, the fire would be roaring through the parched acres of grain toward Calamity Gulch! This was the way the situation stood: the fire had already begun eating at the grass on the creek's edge, and had worked far down the basin. Now it was rolling along on a vast front rimmed by Easter Creek itself, toward the farm lands beyond.

Walt Driscoll, his face smudged with soot and sweat, came running out of the smoke from the front line. "This is bad, Garland," he cried in a stricken voice. "We can't stop 'em now. We'd need a whole army to keep that fire away from our wheat!"

"How 'bout that dam, Garland?" someone yelled.

Driscoll stared at Jim through the eerie light, but he didn't speak.

"Walt, is there any way of stoppin' it now besides—" Jim began tensely.

Driscoll cut him off with a shake of his head. "Not a chance, Garland."

To the south the sky suddenly went orange red, and against the black clouds of smoke, new flames licked high. They heard the thunder of exploding brush, the howl of high-flung sparks. Standing there in this burning world, Jim Garland thought of these men who had worked there beside him, and all the things he had not quite understood now suddenly became clear. There was one sure way of stopping this fire from wiping out the grangers' last hold on life. The dam had to be opened. That impounded water which he had claimed as his own, had to be released for the use of the many—for the rescue of the men who had blindly, unquestioningly, stood by him in his own hour of need!

Turning his back on Walt Driscoll, Jim started at a swinging run for the dam, a half mile away to the west. Five minutes later, and breathing from the bottom of his lungs, he reached the base of the dam. He slid down the bank of the dry channel and scrambled frantically up the other side. There, he stopped short, staring toward the big iron wheel that controlled the locks.

A man was bulked there in the shadows, and that man, Jim suddenly realized, was Max Gannong! Jim reached for his gun, but before he could pull it free of his holster, Gannong fired at him. The bullet cut the air an inch from Jim's head and he ducked, squeezing the trigger at the same instant. Gannong swayed back. With a thin, gurgling scream, he pitched forward on his face.

And then Jim was on the concrete ramp, reaching for the wheel. He had his hands on it when a voice in back of him snarled: "Git away from that, Garland!"

Jim turned slowly to stare into the livid face of Bill Carran. There was a queer tension in the agent's stance, a strange uncertainty. An angular, loose shape there in the darkness about ten feet away, he had a gun in his hand, had it pointed straight at Jim, its long barrel glinting in the starlight.

All at once Carran moved. He took a quick sideways step toward the brink of the dam, then, as Jim jerked his weapon up, his elbow broke hip-high, and his Colt put a long, sullen red flash across the dark.

Two shots blended in a single stuttering detonation, the roar rocketing high in the still air. Jim's bullet drove the wind out of Carran, and the agent seemed to teeter on his heels and grow rigid. Then his knees folded and he crumpled, vanishing backward over the edge of the dam. Jim heard his body hit the rocks of the creek, twenty feet below.

Jim brushed a hand dazedly across the bloody

gash along his temple where Carran's slug had cut, then let his arms fall slackly. Finally coolness came to him, and he whirled around and gripped the iron wheel behind him. He leaned his full weight against it, and at last it began to give. Then, slowly, with squealing protest, it broke free. The heavy wooden locks at the base of the dam were lifting, slowly, ponderously. Water began to suck from under the steep spillway.

Jim spun the wheel with both hands now. It was running free, and the locks groaned mightily under the weight of the water that now pressed down upon them. Suddenly the dark, quiet face of the catch basin seemed to ripple, then to curve and slip forward in a great, solid wall of water to the dry rocks of the channel below.

For the fraction of a second, Jim held but one thought—and kept all others out. This wide body of water would sweep down the gorge, hemmed in by the high banks, until it reached Dogie Flats. There it would gush out, frothing, roaring, overflowing the land, filling the irrigation ditches, flooding the bed of Easter Creek and the wheat fields and forming a barrier between the fire and Calamity Gulch.

Jim climbed down from the dam, voiding the thundering rapids of the channel, and made his way slowly back to the flats. A little while later, he entered the brightly lit living room of Spade Ranch. He pushed quietly through the crowd at the front door, threaded his way through the knots of homesteaders in the room. There were women—granger women—hurrying back and forth as if they owned the place. Jim liked it, and was amazed at himself for liking it. He saw Anne Driscoll at the other side of the room turn from a gallon coffeepot and a tray full of steaming cups to look at him. Her eyes were big and dark and proud. And he saw something else in those eyes—something that took his breath away.

He stared around the room at the faces of the homesteaders, now grimy with soot and sweat, but happy at last. His voice was husky with emotion as he said: "Well, friends, I guess you win. I been a fool for quite a while. And tonight you all taught me something I never realized before. Don't have to tell you what that is, I guess. Or do I?"

A cheer went up in the hot, hurrying room. Three men ran to the door as a far rumble jolted the silence. One of the men, Jules Ganter, turned back and shouted: "By thunder, folks, she's a-fixin' fer to rain! Thank God from whom all blessin's flow!"

Walt Driscoll touched Jim on the arm and the cowman turned quickly, grinning into that deeply seamed, kindly face. Driscoll said softly: "We found out one of our own men, Judd Lankerwell, was workin' with Carran and Gannong, an' playin' their crooked game. We managed to make him open up an' he tol' us it was Carran shot Judy. He saw him do it." His eyes clouded suddenly, then brightened, as he held out a sooty hand. "Jim, I guess my little gal died fer this." He motioned to the crowded room, the happy, laughing faces. "An' I c'n only hope she sees us now."

Jim gripped the homesteader's hand. "Walt, I . . . I sure hope so, too," he said.

Anne Driscoll was waiting for Jim Garland in the now empty kitchen. She turned to face him as he came in. "I'm so glad, Jim." She put out her hands to him. "They were all cheering for you when they heard what you were doing. But I wasn't." She stopped, added quietly: "I . . . I was praying."

He took her hands, held them tightly. "What for . . . Anne?"

He saw color flood her cheeks, saw a lessening of grief in her dark-blue eyes. And because, from the beginning, they had needed no words to speak to one another, he knew her answer. And he knew, too, that he had lost something tonight—a selfish pride, a headstrong willfulness. But he had gained more than he had lost. He had gained the love of a woman, the love of her people, and that was the summed-up total of all the good luck in the world.

A shrill voice in the living room cried: "Listen!"

And then it came. The crash of thunder—the first swift pattering of raindrops on the roof.

THE END.

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JUGHEAD

BY S. OMAR BARKER

The Boss has bought some ponies, an' you've drawed one in your string
That's a plumb tee-total stranger. Nary cowboy knows a thing
About his saddle hist'ry—will he pitch or will he pace?.
Will he drag it when you spur him? Will he blow up in your face?.
You kinda look him over, an' you note his Roman nose,
An' the way he stands three-legged when he gets a chance to doze.
He's got them rollin' eyeballs, you can kinda see the whites,
An' he crowds into the feed rack like his belly knowed its rights.

His under lip's a drooper; he's a jughead, it appears.
He's a sorta shaggy sorrel, but he's got right purty ears.
He dodges when you rope him, an' he ain't so easy led.
He humps up with the saddle, but he doesn't fight his head,
Nor try to dodge the bridle like he done the ketchin' noose.
You somehow get the idee that he figgers what's the use
Of wastin' all that energy to spook an' snort around,
For like as not he's savin' it to strew you on the ground.

He swells up when you cinch him, so you've got to yank it tight.
He grunts some at the squeezin', but he don't try none to bite.
You've got him saddled easy, so you cheek him while you mount,
To see what kind of horse you've drawed, an' if he's any count.
You know he's broke to ride, of course, but that don't signify
That he may not do some buckin'—an' he does. It ain't so high,
But hell ain't got no hammer that could jolt a feller's seat
As hard as that ol' sorrel when he lands on all four feet!

Then, when he's done he's finished, an' you ride him all day long,
Without no monkey-spookin' an' he travels mighty strong.
There ain't no prancin' in him, an' his gait ain't much for style,
But you kinda git to like him, when you've rode him for awhile.
He bucks 'most every saddlin' just to prove he ain't no pet,
But it takes a full day's ridin' just to make that pony sweat.
There ain't much purty to him, but all hell ain't half as wide
As the ground his legs can cover in a single saddle ride.

The Boss, he bought some ponies, an' he cut one to your string
That couldn't beat a burro in a fancy horse-show ring;
Yet when the trail is tough an' long, you set up in your kack
An' thank the Lord for Jughead, for he'll git you there—an' back!

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POWDERSMOKE PAYOFF

by L. L. Foreman

I.

From up here on the Peloncillo slopes a man could command a generous view of the vast valley-land into which he was descending. He could take pondering note of the next mountain range to be crossed, the Hachitas, multicolored by distance and gilt-edged by the early morning sun, forming the eastern boundary of the valley. He could trace with his eye the winding ribbon of road that was an offshoot of the great Butterfield Trail, meandering south down the valley from Lordsburg, a hundred miles to the north, to Eladrevo, five miles this side of the Old Mexico line.

The battered little Lordsburg-Eladrevo stage-coach used this road, but made the round trip only once a month, and then seldom with a heavy load. By tradition and racial instinct, most of the people of Eladrevo and the southern end of Peloncillo Valley looked south to Old Mexico as to their common homeland. Here in this remote southwest corner of the New Mexico territory, Americans of the Anglo-Saxon strain were still more or less foreigners, and Spanish blood remained strong and conservative in its racial ties.

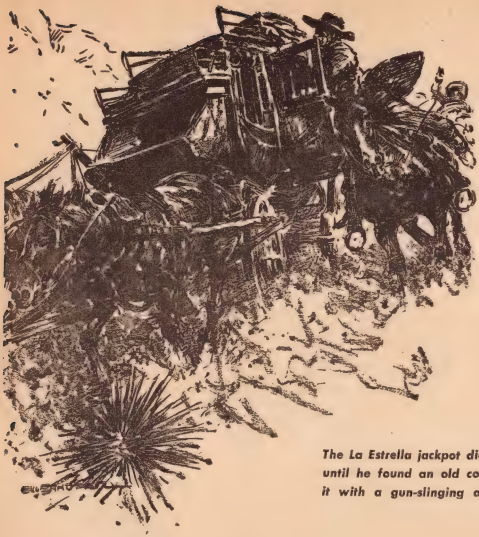
One bold palisade on the face of a Peloncillo foothill stuck out like a blunt and jagged knife blade, and along each side of it ran the steep bend of a dry arroyo. Where the long blade of red sandstone tapered off to form its point, both arroyos converged into one channel, and here two descending horsemen met.

Both drew to a halt. Each had heard the other's progress, and each thoughtfully held one hand hidden behind the shield of his own body. For a while they took measuring stock of each other, before breaking a silence that was weighty. Their brief greetings partook of the nature of warning shots.

"Howdy."

"Howdy."

The first speaker, a dark giant of a man, sat at



The La Estrella jackpot didn't interest the Preacher—until he found an old compadre making a bid for it with a gun-slinging army to fill out his hand

deceptive ease in the saddle of a splendidly proportioned horse as totally black as the rider's broad hat and knee-length coat. That coat, of black broadcloth, was cut along severely ministerial lines, and the flat-crowned hat matched it for austerity, but the broad hat brim canted at a slight angle that was casually rakish, and the face under it made a startling caricature of the somberly clerical garb.

It was an arresting face, dark and strong, stamped with the half-humorous cynicism and saturnine wisdom of many hard-lived years. It reflected a tough-fibered nature inherently masterful, lawless, predatory. The eyes alone, opaque gray and so chillingly calm as to be almost hypnotic, set their owner apart as a man of iron self-control, deadly force, and dangerous potentialities.

He regarded with some humor the man who, he knew, must have trailed him better than a hundred miles from Sixmile in Arizona, across the San Simon Desert and over the Guadalupes, here into New Mexico.

"Pretty hot comin' over the San Simon, wasn't it?" he commented.

The other nodded gravely. "Pretty hot," he agreed. "I like to've cooked before I began hittin' the higher country this side."

This second horseman had youth, but he bore all the signs of seasoning years of experience. The gun belt loosely buckled around his narrow middle was well worn, slick and blackened with oil, and showed good care. No such care showed in his clothes, which were faded and shabby, though his boots were good and his grulla horse and saddle evinced sound judgment. Lean and on the tall side, with a quiet voice and a pair of greenish blue eyes that were steady and coolly reckless, he looked capable enough to be a good lawman or a bad outlaw.

He struck bluntly into the heart of the matter that had brought him tracking the other man over a hundred miles. "When that fight in the Sixmile gamblin' house broke up our poker game, I hadn't yet looked at my hole card. We were bettin' blind, you remember. But I had a king pair and an ace showin', an' there was fourteen hundred dollars cash in the jackpot."

"Fourteen hundred and twenty," corrected the

somber-garbed horseman, his face expressionless.

"All right. Now, I'll admit you didn't start the fight," conceded the younger man. "Those three jayhawkers tried to pull a fake row among themselves an' gun you in the back. I guess they had their own private reasons for that."

"Well, they thought so."

"Yeah. They got what they needed, quick an' sudden, I grant that. An' I grant shootin' out the lights was a handy finish, after that sheriff began squallin' for help. But scoopin' up that jackpot on your way out in the dark— I don't grant that! All you had was two queens—"

"And another in the hole," stated the big man reminiscently.

"How'd you know?" came the swift challenge. "We were bettin' blind on our hole cards."

The big man drew out a long and villainously black cigar, eyed it critically, and bit on the end. "I was dealin'!"

By silent agreement they rode on together, slowly dropping down into the great valley, discussing the matter with grave politeness. Each assured the other that he wanted to be reasonable and fair, and each kept that hidden hand scrupulously shielded from the other's sight.

It was not an argument. Rather, it was a debate, and law-court rules of procedure and courtesy took shame by comparison. The younger man raised some interesting points, but the big man had the fourteen hundred dollars and finally explained with devastating logic and brevity why he was going to hang on to it.

"You just weren't quick enough to grab, and I was, and the game's finished. Besides, I'm headed for Juarez and I need the money."

They drew to a halt again. "I guess we've talked enough," observed the younger man.

"I'd say so," agreed the other. "By the way, if you've got a gun in that off hand—and I think you have—you better tuck it back where it belongs. Keep in mind those three jayhawkers back at Sixmile!"

"I could've shaded 'em as handy as you did." The statement was not a boast, but given as a simple fact.

"Could?" The big man cocked an interested eyebrow. "What's your name?" His interest was purely professional.

"O'Burrishoole."

"Hm-m-m. That's quite a bit o' name to lug around. Are you the Rory O'Burrishoole who raised hell in that Nevada sheep war, couple years ago? Well, well. Mine's Devlin. Er . . . don't forget what I said about that gun!"

Rory O'Burrishoole, war hand and wanderer, gazed pensively down into the valley. After a while he moved his arm slightly. His hidden hand, now empty, came out to rest on his saddlehorn. "I guess maybe I didn't have much of a blind hole card, at that," he granted. "Not with you dealin'!"

He grinned wryly. "If I'd known it was Preacher Devlin I was sittin' down with, I'd have stayed standin' at the bar! An' if I didn't know—an' found out before I started—"

"Gettin' a little tongue-tangled, there, aren't you?" Devlin inquired. "You don't need that name to let folks know you're Irish. All you need do is open your mouth."

Rory O'Burrishoole nodded without resentment. "What I mean is, I could've saved myself this damned journey. It wasn't so much the money that got me goin'. It was . . . well—"

"The principle of the thing," Devlin finished for him. "Sure, that's understandable. I'm all cluttered up with principles, too—where there's cash concerned."

"So I've heard," affirmed Rory, with irony. The things a man was apt to hear about the notorious Preacher Devlin were not conducive to trustful faith in his scruples. Gun master and gambler, rider of the dark trails and wrecker of laws, the lurid reputation of Preacher Devlin leaned heavily to the side of Machiavellian finesse and wickedly eruptive violence.

"So you trailed me all the way from Sixmile, just on principle," mused Devlin. "If I'd known you were behind me I'd have let you catch up sooner. Now, I'm a fair-minded man—"

"I've heard that, too," put in Rory.

"—and I'll give you another chance at the jackpot," ended Devlin, and drew out a deck of cards.

It was a fair offer designed to eliminate further debate, and Rory acknowledged it as such, adding that he would prefer to deal if Devlin didn't object. They got off their horses, and squatted comfortably on their heels with the ground between them for a table.

"Three rounds o' draw poker, best two wins the jackpot," said Devlin.

Down the valley from the north moved a column of dust, snailing along the lonely road, and they heard the steady rumble of wheels and hoofs in the still air. "The stage," Rory commented, with a glance that way, and closely scanned the backs of the cards as he shuffled. He dealt carefully, and palmed the deck while he briefly sized up his hand.

A shot cracked down in the valley, sharp and dry, the rattling echoes of it quickly dying away, and a voice hailed a command. Brake shoes squealed thinly, and the steady rumble of wheels ceased.

"Holdup," remarked Devlin absently, his chilly eyes criticizing his cards.

"By heck, that's what it is, all right!" Rory con-

firmed, with a look down at the stalled stage. "Four hombres just rid out to it."

Devlin made his decision, as between keeping a pair of jacks or trying to fill a flush. "Oh, well—live an' let live. Give me one card."

Rory flipped out the requested card, and gave himself three. "I wouldn't have thought a dinky stage outfit like that would be carryin' enough to make it worthwhile for four—"

"Pretty cheap," agreed Devlin, and flipped the card back again without looking to see what it was. "I like my cards from the top o' the deck, if you don't mind. Just a whim o' mine. Thanks, that's better. What you got?"

"Ace pair."

"First blood's to me, then. I filled my flush." He spread it out, and sat back on his heels. "Deal 'em again, you're doin' all right."

Rory grinned philosophically, thumbing out the next deal. "An' some folks call this a game o' chance! Say, what's busted loose down there, anyway?" He halted the deal to look. "Well, seems like our two-bit road agents have run into trouble, don't it?"

"So's the driver," nodded Devlin. "Somebody just shot him. He's screamin' like— Say, that's no man's scream!"

A murderous fight was raging around the halted stage. The four road agents had barely got down to business, when a second party of riders had suddenly appeared. The second party, numbering a dozen or more, was made up of Mexicans, and they charged in like a cavalry troop. One road agent lay on his back, another dodged about behind the plunging horses with a rifle, and the other two were spurring into the brush lining the hilly side of the trail.

"Finish the deal," said Devlin, and Rory finished it, though preoccupied by the wild scene below.

A knot of the Mexican riders swept around the spooked team, guns thudding, and the trapped road agent there fell like a rag before them. They jumped from their horses, tore open the side doors of the coach, and the screaming sounded clearer. One of the marauders backed out hurriedly, hands clasping his face, but others shoved in past him. They hauled and clawed at somebody inside, and just then the pair of road agents in the brush took to sharpshooting. Even that didn't stop them, though one of them slid on his face against the step and to the ground.

Somebody was being dragged out of the coach, fighting and screaming like a wild cat, and it was a woman; that was evident. It became more than evident when they dragged her out and rushed her to a horse.

"That," vowed Rory, rising, "is goin' too damn far!"

"Yeah." Devlin studied his cards. "Hold your hurry, we still got time to finish this hand."

"The devil with it!" Rory was grabbing the reins of his grulla. "I'm goin' right now!"

Devlin creased his dark brows, a trifle irritated at such a distorted sense of values. It was probably just some little Mexican dance-hall coquette, being fought over by a couple of inflamed rivals and their backers.

"That's the trouble with the Irish—too damn impetuous," he growled, and stepped to his black saddler. "All right, then, let's get down there!"

II.

They hit the trail well below the spot where the stage had halted, but a curve and a hill hid it from their view. Firing still went on, but it sounded more like a hot pursuit in the brush than a stand-up fight. The two remaining road agents were hard pressed and had their hands full, trying to beat off the Mexicans who had taken to the brush after them.

Around the curve swung a small and closely packed knot of riders, five of them wearing tall ant-hill sombreros, and the sixth hatless and struggling in their midst. They jerked to a rearing and tangled halt at sight of the two horsemen loping up to meet them, and three carbines promptly spat smoky welcome.

Devlin dropped his reins, gripped harder with his legs, as his hands whipped under the long black coat. He flipped out a pair of long-barreled guns, and Rory made his draw in the same instant.

"Bet you the jackpot I get three to your two, Irish!"

"I'll take that bet, Preacher!"

The black ran smoothly, and so did the grulla, hoofs rising and falling rhythmically at the free gait. Devlin, riding with a close seat, his long legs hanging straight down, whipped off his first shot as he rose with the easy lift of the black. Rory's gun hammered once beside him. A halted rider bowed over the neck of his nervously dancing horse. Another, in the act of dismounting with a sawed-off Indian rifle, caught his foot in the stirrup, and his head was the first part of him to hit the ground.

They fired again, drawing apart as they charged nearer, and Devlin gave Rory credit for not wasting shells in a pinch. But this time they both picked the same man, attracted by the bright yellow of his shirt and the fact that he was reaching out for the girl, who was kicking her horse and trying to break away. The owner of the yellow shirt cap-

sized as if overreaching his balance, and the girl took that moment to slide nimbly from her rearing horse, gather up her flowing skirts in both hands, and run.

The girl could run—no question about that. Light and fast on her toes. Her small feet and trim ankles flashed like drumsticks beating out a rapid tattoo, and she fairly sailed over the ground, hair flying and the flounces of her dress billowing out behind her. There was some scattered cholla hereabouts, and plenty of rough tufa rock, but that didn't slow her down much when she quit the beaten road and took off across country.

The two remaining Mexicans started after her, but changed course when Rory left the road to head them off, and circled back over the hill, chopping shots at him. Devlin kept to the road, leaving Rory to catch the girl and pick her up. He could hear the stagecoach coming at a furious clip, and he rode to meet it, ready to dispute possession of it with anyone who might have preconceived notions about the matter. It was no part of his nature to leave a job done halfway, once he got started at it, and Rory would have his hands full with that girl. Judging from all appearances, she was in no mood to be caught again by anybody without considerable dissension on her part.

Over the trail's rise loomed the stage, no driver on the box, and the four-horse team clattering along with heads and tails up. The scared animals were in full bolt, their fears in no way dispelled by a recklessly riding Mexican who raced close alongside the leaders, trying to crowd the whole outfit off the trail and wreck it for a halt. Behind came more riders, strung out and all shouting. Their shouts increased when they saw the big, somber-garbed gringo barring the trail, a gun in each fist, but the rider was too intent on his task of wrecking to take notice.

Devlin slung one shot, and the rider spilled out of his saddle as if jerked off by a rope. The team came plunging on, the battered old Concord coach lurching and careening over the bumps, and Devlin reined his black around in a tight turn. He let the team pass, rode alongside the coach long enough to slide his rifle from its saddle scabbard and toss it on the roof, and caught hold of the swinging door. With a heave he left the saddle and clambered onto the coach, letting the black canter free.

The stage driver, true to his job, had tied his lines around the brake handle when he was halted. Devlin pulled them loose, braced one boot against the brake, and threw his weight on the lines. A bullet from the rear whispered viciously by his hat, and another whanged off the hand rail. The team lost headway, jibbing and flinching from the sawing lines, but before they finally decided to quit, Devlin rapidly tied up again and reached back for his rifle. The pursuing horsemen were getting altogether too close.

Devlin stretched out on the roof, the heavy repeater to his shoulder, and at once the pursuers showed a disposition to fan out and make it a bush-whacking skirmish. Devlin didn't give them time to carry out their plan. The rifle whammed angrily, one screaming shot after another. When it ran empty and he changed back to his pair of pistols, there wasn't much left to do with them but hasten the flight of the remnant pursuers.

He slid the guns away, returned to the box, and dragged the team to its final standstill. Then he looked around for Rory O'Burrishoole, and when he saw him he grinned.

Rory was having a time of it with the girl. He had caught her and picked her up onto his saddle, but holding her there was a different matter. She was fighting him tooth, nail and feet. Her desperate ferocity, Devlin considered—from his comfortable viewpoint of an interested onlooker—was not only remarkably energetic and ravaging, but understandable, though founded upon error. She had just gone through an alarming experience. She had been the object of a holdup, been kidnaped and mauled by a second bunch of desperadoes, and now chased and caught by a third party. Obviously, her trust in the motives of tough-looking strangers in this section was pretty badly shattered.

Rory, the grulla and the girl, all three in a sort of tangle, moved in the general direction of the coach. Even the grulla seemed alarmed, and in disgust at last bucked off both struggling encumbrances and walked to the better company of Devlin's black.

Rory bounded up, caught the girl again as she tried to dart away, and yelled for help. "Devlin—for the love o' Lucy—c'mere an' tell this girl I'm a decent man! She's wreckin' me!"

Devlin, with no illusions about his looks, didn't consider himself the most suitable man in the world to dispel with soft words the fright of a frantic girl. But he dropped off the coach and walked over. The girl, he saw, was no tricky little dance-hall piece, and if she had any Mexican in her she didn't show it. She was dark-haired, but her blazing eyes were a deep blue, and her skin was fair. Right now her hair was in a tumbled mess, and her color was high and flaming.

"Cool off, the pair of you," counseled Devlin, and paused by them. "Girl, if you've got half the sense you look to have—"

That was as far as he got. A small white hand flashed at his grim and forbidding face, and he barely managed to dodge it. He moved in swiftly, got behind the girl, and his fingers snapped around her arms. "Why, you durn little spitfire!"

The next interruption came in the shape of a quick back-heel kick that caught him in the shin. He muttered an ungentle word, and began to regret letting himself be drawn into this affair.

"See how she does?" Rory turned a face that looked as if it might have been dragged through cactus. "She just won't listen to— Oof!" He got a kick in the knee.

"Ought've let the Mex bunch take her. Would've served 'em right!" grunted Devlin. "Take hold of her legs. Yes, I said her legs. Well, her feet then, blast your Irish modesty! That's better. Stay with 'em!"

He shook the girl. "Now, listen to me, an' quit tryin' to butt me in the chest with the back o' your head. It'll hurt you more'n it will me if I let you do it. I'll give you ten seconds to cool off, then I'm goin' to rope you if you don't begin behavin' like a lady. An' I'm takin' a lot for granted when I assume you know how to behave like one! You look like a dance-hall trick on a wild night, with your hair like that!"

The girl found her voice. "Why . . . why— Oh, you— You're no gentleman!"

"That makes it unanimous; nobody else thinks so, either," said Devlin. With some misgivings he released her arms. Immediately, her small hands busied themselves in fussing hastily with her tumbled hair, and he breathed easier.

"For some foolish reason which I haven't yet figured out," he went on, "we busted in an' saved you from that bunch. Believe me, we've got no ideas about carryin' you off to our lair or anything o' that kind. Person'ly, I look forward to bein' well shed o' you! An' that Irish relic holdin' your feet prob'ly feels the same way, only more so. Look what you did to him!"

Rory let go of her feet and rose warily. He was regarding her as if he thought he recognized something about her and hoped he was right.

"She . . . uh . . . didn't do any great harm," he mumbled.

The girl stopped fussing with her hair and gazed at them, first dubiously, then in shocked dismay. Her mouth was soft with youth, her short nose turned up a little, her chin was firm and rounded, and she looked as if she might laugh a good deal under normal conditions.

"Oh . . . I'm sorry!" she stammered, and then she wasn't a spitfire any more. "I'm terribly sorry."

"What's your name an' where are you from?" Devlin demanded.

"Moira Mullarky. I'm from Ireland."

Rory O'Burrishoole opened his mouth in a wide grin. "Blazes, I knew you must be Irish!" he cried. "My name's O'Burrishoole—Rory Fitzpatrick O'Burrishoole."

Moira Mullarky smiled a dazzling smile. "Well, now!"

"My father came from Ireland," added Rory.

"Well, now!"

"From Kinalmeaky . . . County Cork."

"Well, now! And I'm from Kinsale, not ten miles from it," cried Moira Mullarky.

"Well, now!" said Rory Fitzpatrick O'Burrishoole.

Devlin turned away, faintly revolted at such unintelligent conversation.

They drifted after him to the coach, continuing their mutually pleasant discussion. The girl had altogether forgotten her fright, and Rory seemed oblivious of his marred face. By the time they reached the coach they were attempting to trace a possible relationship, and were already digging into grave dust for mutual great-grand-aunts-in-law.

"Climb in," said Devlin, brutally breaking into their tête-à-tête. He sat on the driver's box, the black tied behind at the boot. "Say, Irish, haven't you mislaid somethin'? Hey, I'm talkin' to you!"

Rory poked his head out of the coach and looked up at him. "Eh?"

"You've forgot somethin'."

"What?"

"Your horse, you poor Kilkenny loon!"

"Oh!" Rory climbed back out of the coach, red up to his hair, and Devlin whipped up the team.

Rory caught up on his grulla and rode close to the coach, talking with the girl, who leaned out of the door window.

"If you're not too busy," Devlin called down dryly, "ask her what's the reason two mobs should try to grab hold of her."

Moira herself answered, and said brightly that she knew no special reason—but sure didn't such terrible things happen every day in this wild country of America? She had heard about the savage red men, she said, who cut off your hair and left you without any. Some of those men back there had been sort of reddish dark-complected, so she knew they were red men, and worried to her heart she'd been about her hair.

Devlin gravely met Rory's glance. "Such nice hair, too," remarked Rory, and Devlin took a fresh grip on his cigar.

"Where are you travelin' to, an' why?" Devlin queried presently.

"To a town called Eladrevo," answered Moira. "I'm going to see a Spanish lawyer there named Don Huitado. It has to do with some sort of family business, and he wrote and said it may mean a great deal to me, so that's why I came."

"Alone?"

Yes, she had come alone, she said, to be sure, for there hadn't been money enough to bring Aunt

Norah. That is, she called her Aunt Norah, though she was no blood kin at all, but a mother couldn't be better, bless her sweet soul. "I'm an orphan, you see," she more or less elucidated, "and I've no kin living at all—though there must be some in Spain or somewhere. Only they wouldn't be named Mullarky."

Devlin gave up. The international complications and totally illogical reasons for everything connected with this girl were getting too involved. She had candid eyes and an engagingly frank way of saying nothing sensible, but she was either a girl of tangled mystery or a pretty idiot.

III

The stagecoach rolled into Eladrevo, throwing up dust behind it, and citizens stared at the big flinty-faced stranger on the box. Eladrevo's architecture was mostly of dobe brick, and the layout of the town strongly suggested Spanish origin.

But the plaza flaunted an Anglo-Saxon influence, in the shape of a timber building with a high false front, large front windows, and the final civilizing touch of a new pair of batwing doors. Devlin drew the coach up before the doors, tied the lines, and climbed down. A freshly painted sign proclaimed the building to be the Old Glory Hotel and Saloon—American patronage invited—but Devlin first sought quarters for his horse.

Several men lurking in dark doorways peered at him with hard interest, he noticed, and a Mexican across the plaza took a horse from a hitching rack and rode off in something of a hurry. The stables and corral of the Old Glory were in the rear of the building, and Devlin headed that way, leading his black and Rory's grulla.

A hidden rifle spat spitefully somewhere, and the Mexican rider ducked, his sombrero suddenly cocked over. He gestured defiantly and swung off into a crooked side street, bent low and raking his horse with his spurs.

Devlin paused, while a thick and sullen silence settled over the town, broken only by the fast retreating beat of the hoofs. The peering eyes of the lurking watchers flickered to the side street and returned to bear upon him. He went on to the hotel stables, his mood sharp and reflective. The glowering hostility of this mixed Spanish-American town dug at the senses, definite and tangible as a naked blade. There were turgid undercurrents of crime and violence here, and the sharpshooting affray in the streets left no ripple on the still and brooding surface of life.

When Devlin returned after putting up the horses, he found Rory engaged in argument and Moira warmly backing him up. They stood on the boardwalk beside the coach, facing a group of the men who had watched Devlin. One, a long-jawed man wearing a star, put all the questions.

"Where'd it happen an' what did they look like?"

"About four miles up the road—" began Rory.

"They were red men, some of them!" put in Moira helpfully.

The sheriff looked down his nose at her. "Likely story! Where's Kansas Billy, the driver?"

"Dead," said Rory, his chin beginning to jut out, "as well as some others. You ought to be callin' a posse together right away, if that tin badge you're wearin' means anything!"

The sheriff bristled. "I reckon I'll put you under arrest till I check up on—"

"I reckon," countered Devlin, coming up behind him, "you might do better to put yourself on a horse an' go tend to business!"

The lawman spun around at the harsh growl, and the group grew very still, staring with alert gaze at the tall, dour-eyed gun fighter. An inquisitive bartender squinted out over the batwing doors, took one all-embracing look, and abruptly withdrew. The hush lasted until Devlin spoke again.

"S'long, sheriff!"

The simple farewell could have held either of two meanings, one harmless, the other sinister. Devlin stood with his arms hanging, the long-fingered hands extended a trifle, and his ministerial coat open. His opaque gray eyes had taken on an oblique slant, and they shone with the pale, saturnine humor of the master gunman contemplating one more victim. He was recognized here, he knew. The recognition had lurked in the long glances of the watching men, and now it widened the sheriff's stare.

The sheriff tried to save his face. "I'll . . . uh . . . talk to you fellers later," he promised, a little tight around the mouth. He moved off, and the group silently followed his lead. One of the men swung up onto the coach, pulled loose the lines, and prepared to drive off. He did it casually, as if it was his job to do it, and he was going to run the coach and team over to the stage office.

"Wait! My trunk!" called out Moira.

The man ignored her, and swung the long bight of the lines to whip up the team. Rory leaped up beside him, snatched at the lines, and shoved a balled fist within an inch of the man's face.

"I'm just gettin' mad enough to bust somebody," he rasped, "an' it looks like you're—"

The quick and solid roar of a shot cut him off and set the horses stamping. The sheriff's group had paused and turned, on the alert to seize the advantage of an inattentive moment. One of the group, a bright-eyed stripling with buck teeth, took a chance and whirled into a doorway, slashing

out his gun. Devlin's draw and shot had caught him just before he made cover. The gun master turned his stony stare from him and sent it drifting over the group.

Bright Eyes dropped his gun, looking painfully white, and sank down tiredly on the doorstep, holding his shoulder. "My mistake, Preacher!" he mumbled, and just then Rory knocked his man off the coach. Moira had to side-step to avoid a flying leg

The sheriff's men stood motionless, each caught short in his attitude of halted action, most of them with hands poised readily over low-slung holsters Their strained regard rested on Devlin's pair of heavy pistols, which now pointed skyward, mutely inviting them to follow the rash example of the buck-toothed stripling. Up on the coach, Rory executed a speedy cross-draw and gestured for Moira to make herself missing. But the girl stooped over the man who lay knocked senseless on the boardwalk and neatly filched his gun.

Again the sheriff set the cue by swinging on his heel and making off, muttering something about tending to this affair later. The group slowly broke up, and the wounded youth stumbled after them.

Moira threw up the leather apron of the coach boot, and tugged at her trunk. Rory jumped down and helped her, while Devlin closely scanned a gathering of Mexicans across the plaza, searching them for combative prospects. From all signs, this country appeared to be split wide open by two warring factions—Mexicans on the one side, and gringos on the other—and for some hidden reason the girl was a bone of contention between the two.

They entered the hotel by the side door. It led into a short hall that ran past the barroom to the foot of a staircase. Devlin looked in on the barroom. It was empty except for the bartender, a stout man with a red and perspiring face, who evidenced an uneasy state of mind by sidling toward a backbar door.

"Hey, pull up there!" Devlin called curtly. "We want rooms."

"Ain't got none," gulped the fat man. "All took."

Devlin glanced at the keyboard behind the bar. "You're a liar," he said calmly. "Hand over three o' those keys."

The bartender swallowed. "Listen, gents, I dassen't—" His voice trailed off helplessly as Devlin stalked around the end of the bar and helped himself to three tagged keys.

The rooms were cramped, but fairly clean and furnished with washstands. Rory, washed and half shaved, his face still wet, burst into Devlin's corner room and found the long rider carefully cleaning his guns.

"A mob's gatherin' all round the back an' in the side alleys, Devlin!" he announced grimly. "It's that sheriff's bunch, only more of 'em. What the hell d'you make of it?"

Devlin dropped a spot of oil into each cylinder. He spun the cylinders, snapped them shut, and tested the actions. "Take a look out that front window."

Rory looked, and whistled softly. Across the plaza, facing the hotel, massed a crowd of swarthy men who could have stepped from the renegade ranks of any rebel general's army. All were ponderously armed, and none exhibited the dull docility of poverty-crushed peons. They were fighters, and the sharp-edged quality of them showed in their bold black eyes. The stagecoach had been driven off, and no women or unarmed citizens could be seen anywhere.

"Saint alive!" breathed Rory. "What band o' devil's delight have we sashayed into?"

"Better not stay too long at that window," Devlin advised. "Might be a temptation—"

The crack of an exploding cartridge and the shattered dissolution of the window came almost simultaneously. Rory leaped aside and swore. Devlin glanced up at him.

"That's what I meant," he murmured, and reloaded his oiled guns, examining and tenderly wiping each stubby shell.

Moira came running in. She stopped, gazed at the broken window, and then at the two men. "Mercy me, such a place!" she exclaimed, and stepped toward the window. "What are all those men—"

Rory caught her promptly and pulled her back.

"But what does it mean, all those men out there?" she insisted.

"It means," drawled Devlin, "that you've got more men interested in you than any girl has a right to expect!" He shoved the washstand over the floor and jammed it against the window. "A fine howd-ye-do this. Looks like the whole town an' half the territory's on our necks, an' all we did was— Who's that?"

A diffident rapping sounded on the door. At Devlin's bark the door opened part way and a head appeared. It was a bald and bony head, with a thin face and a humped nose that was too large for it. Cavernous black eyes blinked annoyedly behind a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Gentlemen, may I ask that you make less noise?" said the gargoyle testily. "I reside and have my office in the next room, and your abominable noise is very distracting. The making of unnecessary noise, gentlemen, is the mark of an inferior intelligence. I detest it! To me it gives nothing less

than excruciating pain, and it is the trial of my life that I must—"

"C'mon in," Devlin invited, and yanked him in without further ado. "Maybe you can tell us what's loose around here?"

But the next-door neighbor was too taken up with his grievance to be side-tracked into anything less important. He was a skinny little man, old and cantankerous, dressed in rusty black serge, and he was obviously an educated Spaniard of indoor tastes. His bleached skin bespoke a rare acquaintance with sunshine.

He went on in his precise, academic way, absently straightening his shiny coat, but otherwise ignoring Devlin's high-handed kidnaping of him. "It is the trial of my life that I must be constantly affronted by hideous noises, and I was born with the curse of superacute hearing. The slightest sound, particularly a discordant sound—"

"All right, Noisy, we believe you," interrupted Devlin, whose harsh voice was anything but melodious. "Now answer my question."

The little man winced and eyed the big gun fighters without liking. "My name, sir, is Don Ambrosio Huitado!"

"Do say!" ejaculated Rory. "Moira, isn't that the name of the gent you came to see?"

"Why, to be sure!" Moira curtsied formally and charmingly to the old gentleman. "Mr. Huitado, I'm Moira Mullarky."

Don Ambrosio Huitado cocked his bony head as if savoring something with the hypercritical discrimination of a connoisseur. "A pleasant voice—yes, definitely pleasant," he gave his verdict. "Clearly articulate, but modulated. It does not offend the ear. Accept my congratulations, Miss . . . er . . . eh? Mullarky?"

He pronounced it "Moo-yarky." He stared blankly at the girl. "Good heavens, this is terrible . . . terrible! Did you not receive my last letter-I warned you in it not to come. Ah, what a pity! What a terrible, terrible pity!"

Rory planted himself in front of the distressed old lawyer. "What's pitiful about it?" he demanded.

Don Ambrosio spread his shaking, blue-veined old hands. "I have brought her to disaster!" he replied hushedly. "She has no chance . . . no chance at all!" He clucked his tongue in mournful sorrow. "Such a pleasing voice, too!"

He turned back to Moira, who was gazing at him in bewilderment. "The carved buffalo horn—have you it with you?"

"Yes, it's in my trunk. I'll go and get it."

She left, and ten seconds later her scream sent Rory leaping out after her. But Devlin went and took another look into the plaza. The Mexicans had spread out. Devlin spied out the other window, down into the side alley. Other men lurked there—gringos, these, partly screened behind the high sides of an empty Mexican cart that the blacksmith next door had evidently been repairing.

Devlin scowled, and wished himself well out of here. To be hemmed in tight by one gun mob was bad enough, but two mobs were plenty too much. He began to feel like a stag at bay on a hill, surrounded by two hungry wolf packs. Besides, he saw no stakes for himself in the mad and menacing enigma, and that irritated his practical mind.

Some sort of commotion sounded along the hallway outside the room, followed by the whirlwind clatter of a body descending the stairs in a rush. Moira and Rory came back in, Moira flushed, and Rory licking a skinned knuckle.

"It was that bartender," Rory divulged shortly. "The fat thief was pawin' into her trunk."

Moira opened an oblong-shaped leather box that she was carrying. She drew from it an old buffalo powder horn, a carved and polished thing with a silver ball on the point. The carving was in the form of a coat-of-arms, elegantly executed. It was plugged at the thick end with a black substance that bore several impressions of a small seal, stamped into it long ago while warm and unhardened.

She held it out. "Here it is, Mr. Huitado."

The aged Spaniard jerked away as if he thought she intended to gore him with it. "No, no!" he stuttered, and began backing out. "I . . . I refuse to accept it! Young lady, take my advice; throw that thing out the window and let those who seek it kill each other for it!"

IV.

Devlin reached out a long arm and pushed the Spaniard into a chair. "Take it easy, Ambrose. What's so spooky about an old powder horn? S'pose you tell us, h'm?" He bent over and sank his voice to a growl. "Talk up or I'll squall in your supersensitive ear!"

Don Ambrosio flinched at the threat. "Barbarian!" he muttered. "Dissonant-voiced ruffian! Very well, I'll tell you." He pointed at the horn. "A hundred men would willingly kill you for that! Two men, I happen to know, would pay a very high price for it. On the possession of that thing rests the fate and ownership of . . . of a minor kingdom! Yes, a kingdom!"

"Where's the kingdom?" queried Devlin, and eyed the old powder horn with a totally new interest. Maybe this bullet-splashed game didn't lack high stakes, after all.

Don Ambrosio gestured about him. "Here. This corner of New Mexico. All this Peloncillo Valley,

from the Mexican boundary almost up to Lordsburg. It is an old Spanish grant. You have heard, I presume, of the old Spanish land grants?"

Devlin nodded. He knew about them, of course. For years many of them had been the subjects of bitter dispute and litigation. During Spain's royal reign over what it considered the Spanish province of New Mexico, huge land grants had been carelessly conferred upon various favorites of the system, faulty and tyrannical, but magnificently splendid in its wealth and proportions. Cattle and sheep were counted by the tens of thousands. Landowners seldom saw the full extent of their land grants, nor knew the exact location of their boundaries, nor cared.

Mexico, after its break with Spain, had been too occupied with internal war and border strife to make any change in the situation. But after the

The Preacher pulled the stage to a stop and the sullen animosity of the town warned him that he had ridden into a baited trap.

crown. The sprawling realm of New Mexico, then embracing most of the Southwest, had become a land of great haciendas and mammoth ranchos, of incredible wealth and equally incredible poverty, where the haughty Spanish haciendados ruled as potentates and the Indian peons worked as serfs.

It was the last stronghold of the ancient feudal Mexican War and the thrust of Western democracy into the land, the old order began crumbling. It crumbled, but its reverberations could still be heard here and there where Spanish grantees fought to retain their hold. Law courts had been set up to rule upon the claims. Wherever a grant holder could prove with reasonably legal documentation

his right to his land grant, it was ceded to him. When he failed to produce such proof, the land was declared open for settlement by homesteaders

"This is the Velasco Grant," Don Ambrosio went on. "It was originally conferred by the Spanish crown, nearly two hundred years ago, upon a blood relative of Viceroy Luis de Velasco. The last Velasco to own it was Don Gregorio, who died two years ago at the age of ninety-three. Unfortunately, Don Gregorio left no children, and I have been engaged since his death in attempting to trace his next of kin. I am, perhaps, the greatest living student of the famous Velasco family," he added with a certain show of pride.

"Undoubtedly," Devlin assured him politely. "Go on. Who's offering the cash reward for that old buffalo horn?"

But the old attorney was not to be hurried. "I shall come to that," he answered. "Now, it so happens that a short time ago a certain man appeared from the south with a large force of armed Mexican ruffians, took possession of the Velasco hacienda—which is named La Estrella—and laid claim to the grant. He claims to be a direct descendant of Bartolomeo de Velasco, the original grantee, and calls himself Don Ricardo de Velasco."

"Don—what? Ricardo, did you say?" Devlin's eyes narrowed.

Huitado nodded. "You know him?"

"No, I reckon not," Devlin muttered slowly. "I know a certain Don Ricardo, but it'd hardly be the same rascal. Can he prove his claim?"

"In a sense, yes," admitted the Spaniard. "The courts believe him, and they have given him one year in which to produce proof of grant." He waved a skinny finger. "But he is no true Velasco! No well-born Velasco would have such outrageously insolent and noisy followers! Also, he is thought to be a cattle thief. He has overrun the range with thousands of many-branded Mexican cattle."

"Sure sounds like my Don Ricardo!" observed Devlin. "If it is, he's playing for mighty big stakes this time. But he never was a piker, I'll say that for him. Can you break his claim in court?"

"I could have done so easily a short time ago," declared Don Ambrosio. "But not now. Nor would I dare make a move to try!" He pointed at Moira. "There is the real and legal owner of La Estrella and the Velasco Grant!"

They stared at him, disregarding sounds of movement outside in the tension-filled plaza. Rory was first to speak. "She's no Spanish girl!" he blurted. "Hell, she's as Irish as I am, an' more!"

Moira looked guilty. "I'm afraid you're wrong," she confessed. "My grandfather's father-in-law, or somebody like that, was Spanish."

"It was your great-grandfather, on the distaff side of your lineage," Don Ambrosio corrected her, "and he was the son of Bartolomeo de Velasco. At that time, Spain had established overseas trade with Ireland, and Kinsale was the chief port. Don Bartolomeo's son engaged in it, and he eventually married an Irish lady and settled in Kinsale, where he died. I need not go into the many details which I have traced and uncovered in my research, but I can state positively that you are the only living descendant of that union, and therefore your title to the Velasco estate is clear!"

"What's the buffalo horn got to do with it?" Devlin asked.

"Everything!" exclaimed the lawyer. "Don Bartolomeo, according to his own diary, kept the original Spanish royal deed of grant in his powder horn. He packed it in melted wax to preserve it from mildew, plugged up the end of the horn with black rosin, and sealed it with his signet ring. After his death, many of his personal belongings, including the horn, were sent to his son in Ireland. The son died a short time later, and nothing was heard from his widow, so the estate passed to a distant Velasco relative. You can see that is the same horn, by the Velasco crest and the seal of Don Bartolomeo's signet ring."

Devlin took the horn from Moira and examined it. He struck a match and held it to the plugged end. There was a quick sputter of flame, and he had some little trouble in smothering it out.

"That's rosin, all right," he murmured, sucking a burned finger. "Yeah, your Don Ricardo upstart naturally would crave the grant deed, so he could cinch his claim in the courts. But you said there are two hombres bidding for it. Who's the other?"

The Spaniard motioned toward the rear. "He is the one who has brought in all those gringo gunmen. His name is Quentin Falk. What his interest in the matter is, I do not know. I had hoped to keep everything secret until Miss Moo-yarky and I could appear safely before the court and establish her claim. That is why I sent for her to come, without divulging very much to her in my letters. But my clerk got drunk downstairs one night, and told all he knew. I sent another letter at once to Miss Moo-yarky, warning her not to come."

"The letter was likely stolen before it got to Lordsburg," Devlin remarked.

Huitado nodded. "Very probably. All the proof that I worked to gather—old birth and death records, wills, and Don Bartolomeo's private diary—was likewise stolen. A band of masked men held me up in my office one night and took it. They were some of those gringo gunmen of Falk's, I am certain."

"So that's why two mobs fought over the stage,

eh?" Rory muttered. "Both were out to grab Moira and the horn. Why, the dirty—"

He paused, catching Devlin's deeply speculative stare. "Some hombres," he said meaningly, "would do anything for cash!" He snatched the horn, dropped it back into its leather box, and slammed the lid shut. "I'll shoot it out with any man who makes a grab for that, no odds who he is!"

Devlin grinned faintly and turned to the windows, aware of a heavy hush outside. The scene had changed some out there. The two heavily armed factions no longer gave all their attention to the Old Glory. The Mexicans were watching the gringos grouped behind the cart in the alley, and the gringos narrowly eyed a lone Mexican who paced his deliberate way across the plaza, coming toward the saloon.

He was slim and dapper, this lone Mexican, dressed in the expensively fine charro garb of tight-fitting pants, frogged jacket, and embroidered sombrero of rich plush. Most Mexicans this far north showed the gringo influence of blue jeans and cotton shirts, but not this one. Here was a *muy grande caballero* who dressed the part with flair and studied effect. The white bone handles of a pair of holstered guns nodded and winked at his thighs as he sauntered jauntily on his way.

Devlin bit clean through his cigar. His deep-set eyes took on their oblique slant at sight of the elegant figure, and his hard mouth twitched again in the shadow of a grin that was grudging but appreciative. Blast him, the fellow had the sublime nerve of a saint.

There he walked, with the easy air of a man on his way to nothing more important than a drink, while a dozen gringo gunmen glared at him from the alley. His Mexican crowd would open up fast if required, but that wouldn't save him. He was insolently gambling his life that the gringos would use discretion—and he made good on his bet.

A moment later his light step sounded on the stairs, then along the hallways outside. Devlin walked to the door and opened it, keeping it before him. The Don appeared in the open doorway. He bowed with a fine military snap, clicking his polished heels so that the silver spurs jingled musically. When he straightened up, his handsome face wore a masking smile, though his dark eyes openly mocked what he saw.

"Excuse my presumption," he murmured, with barely a trace of slurring accent, and stepped sedately into the room. "I have come to welcome—"

Then the door swung shut, and he saw Devlin, standing tall and somber beside him, with bleak eyes that were chill and quizzical, and a pair of long-fingered hands that hung deceptively at rest with the thumbs hooked into the lapels of his long black coat. The Don went very still, his charming smile frozen and his eyes suddenly brittle as glass.

"'Lo, Rico," Devlin greeted him tonelessly. "Thanks for the welcome. I was beginning to think I had no friends here!"

The Don found his voice. "I . . . ah . . . amigo, you surprise me! But a pleasant surprise, of course," he made haste to add. "Oh, most pleasant! Er . . . hm-m-m . . . will you smoke?"

Devlin shook his head. "I never use 'em, as you might recall. An' I happen to know you don't keep 'em in your hip pocket, unless you've changed your habits, so make your hands behave!"

Huitado blinked at both of them through his spectacles. "Then . . . then you do know this man?"

Devlin didn't shift his steady regard. "Yeah, we're by way o' bein' old friends," he responded, and the aged Spaniard sniffed, obviously feeling that it was no recommendation to either one of them.

The break was long enough for the Don to regain some of his usual easy composure. "Amigo, this happy occasion calls for refreshments," he urged warmly. "Shall we go down to the bar? I am sure your friends will excuse you."

For an instant their eyes met and clashed, sending and receiving cold challenge. Both were master gun fighters, skilled in chicanery and tricky maneuver, never backing down and ready at all times to match wits and violence.

Devlin nodded. "Sure." He pulled open the door, his hand gaining the knob just ahead of the Don's reach. "No, Rico—after you!"

V.

With the fat bartender nowhere to be seen, Devlin and the Don poured their own drinks from a bottle on the bar, standing side by side.

"The last time we parted, Rico," Devlin remarked reminiscently, "you were still calling yourself Don Ricardo de Risa. An' you were half a jump ahead of seventeen kinds o' law, as usual! I don't recall any Velasco in your name."

Don Ricardo de Risa, otherwise known as the Laughing One—bandit extraordinary, one-time rebel general, and the quickest shot south of the Rio Grande—tested his whiskey and set it down. He ran his experienced eye over the backbar shelves, seeking something better suited to his discriminating palate.

"Merely an abbreviation. My full name is Don Ricardo de Risa y Velasco," he drawled.

"Hm-m-m." Devlin finished his drink. "Must've been a maverick branch somewhere on the Velasco family tree."

Don Ricardo, going behind the bar, threw him a wintry stare. "As a Velasco, I resent the implica-

tions of that remark!" he declared with dignity. "The Velascos—"

"Come clean, Rico; you're not foolin' me!" Devlin calmly cut him short. "You've jumped into a good thing, an' you're anxious to clinch it. Say, hand me some o' those cigars while you're prowlin' around there."

It kept him occupied, watching Don Ricardo and at the same time keeping tabs on all doors and windows. Out there in front were the Don's fighting men, and all around the sides and rear were the gringo gunhands. The hotel was their objective, and sooner or later one side or the other would make a move. When it came, this town was going to blow up, and this barroom would be the first part of it to explode. As for whatever the Don might have in his agile mind, that was a question. It was seldom the Don's way to approach a play directly, but he could be fatally sudden when he got to it.

Don Ricardo brought cigars and a tall green bottle to the bar, and played host. "To a certain extent you are right, amigo," he allowed pensively. "I have hold of a very good thing, but I also have my problems, without you having to come along and add to them!"

He played his dark eyes over the big gringo gun fighter, the only man who could shake his sublime self-confidence, and frowned as he poured his green *creme de menthe*. He and Devlin had crossed wits many times in their lurid pasts, and paid for it. Each had respect for the other's special gifts, and each knew that when the showdown came they probably both would go down smoking. It was not a step to be lightly undertaken.

"This Falk hombre crowdin' you?" Devlin queried, helping himself to cigars.

Don Ricardo lifted his eyes from his pouring. "You know him? No? Well, he is the promoter of a land-and-cattle company. A foreign syndicate, I think. Very wealthy, judging from the high-priced gunmen he has brought in. Gear, the so-called sheriff, is one of them. A dangerous man, that Falk. The confounded bandit is trying to rob me of my land!" he ended indignantly.

It was the first time Devlin had ever heard of anybody trying to rob Don Ricardo, and it intrigued him. Generally it was the other way around. "Damned outrage," he commented with scant sympathy. "Why not smoke him out?"

"It isn't as simple as that," returned the Don. "If open fighting breaks out, troops from Fort Bayard will come in to restore order. That would mean serious investigation and . . . ahem . . . well, I prefer for that not to happen. Falk has some political power, and he holds himself up as the friend and champion of the homesteaders. In the past, several homesteaders were allowed to settle here. Falk has stirred them up against me, and is trying to bring on trouble, so that he can have an excuse for asking the soldiers to come in and take control. Some of those homesteaders have been here for years, and they think they have a right to stay—damn their impudence!"

"You've got a tiger by the tail, Rico!"

The Don laughed shortly. "No, no, amigo, I am all right. All I need is that deed of grant. Then, right to defend my land from intruders. I'll smash with my claim secure, I shall have a perfect legal right to defend my land from intruders. I'll smash Falk and his hirelings, run the homesteaders out of the valley, and establish myself once and for all the master of La Estrella, owner of the Velasco Grant —*Grande Patron* of the Peloncillo!"

"And," Devlin put in dryly, "you'll also be in a fair way to drain half the cattle out o' Mexico! But first the grant deed, hm-m-m?"

"Er . . . exactly," assented the Don, and scanned the gun master's unreadable face with a searching glance. "Until I have it, I wish to avoid trouble," he stated frankly. "I would . . . ah . . . pay five thousand dollars for that Velasco powder horn!"

Devlin twirled his cigar contemplatively, listening to slight sounds around the building and to the rattle of wheels drawing to a halt in the rear. There was some hushed activity back there, and the Don's fighting men were growing restless in the plaza.

"How about that Mullarky girl?" he inquired. "Old Huitado says he dug up enough proof of her heritage claim to upset you you in any court. Falk stole it from him, an' likely plans to hold it over you."

"Those," murmured Don Ricardo, "are minor matters which I shall attend to in good time! First the powder horn."

"Fifteen thousand," said Devlin.

Don Ricardo half closed his dark eyes, masking his thoughts. "Ten."

"Cash?"

"Gold!"

Devlin nodded, and his eyes traveled along the bar to the side entrance that led from the hotel hallway. Rory stood there, glaring at him with bitter accusation in his blazing eyes, his gun half drawn.

Devlin said gently: "No, Irish; better not. You'd be surprised what one shot would start around here!" He reached across the bar and blocked the Don's hand-streaking motion.

"Who is he?" rapped the Don.

Devlin shrugged. "Just a fellow I beat out of fourteen hundred dollars. Persistent cuss. Trailed me all the way from— Dammit, Rico, stand easy!"

But the Don had whirled around, and when Devlin followed his narrow stare he saw the cause.

The backbar door swung slowly open, and a man entered with the careful deliberation of a cat crossing a muddy lane.

He was large, stout, dressed in city attire except for riding boots and a wide-brimmed hat. His monstrously big face had the fat and pallid softness of lard, but the round green eyes that peered out of it were as hard as glass. He betrayed no habits of nervousness. He moved in, surveyed Devlin, then Don Ricardo, and nodded. His pale and massive face remained lax and expressionless. His voice, when he spoke, held no special expression, either, and his words were so commonplace as to carry no meaning.

"How do you do, gentlemen." No rising inflection at the end. Not a question, but merely a habit of cold civility that smacked of the business office.

Don Ricardo surveyed him up and down, then elected to ignore him, though his jaw muscles bunched and a tiny vein over his nose stood out markedly. He whipped his sharp glance to the hallway door, but Rory was gone. No sounds of any kind now disturbed the weighted silence around the building.

The Don moved to the batwing doors without turning his back to the newcomer, and sank his voice to a purring whisper that only Devlin could hear. "Get the powder horn and come with me, amigo—quickly! I have the gold at La Estrella."

Devlin shook his head, scrutinizing the armed rabble in the plaza. "No, Rico, I'll let you bring it here."

The Don hid his angry disappointment behind an indifferent shrug that only confirmed Devlin's suspicions. "Very well. But watch that man! He is Quentin Falk. My men will be on guard while I am gone. If any attempt is made to take that powder horn out of this building—amigo, I advise you not to let that happen!" He passed swiftly out of the barroom.

Devlin swore silently, his thoughts on the rankicky young Irish war hand upstairs, and Moira, and the buffalo horn. It came to him that he and they stood between two fires on hell's hottest lid, with no way to jump and the fires closing in on them. Had it been a matter of standing off Rico and his mob—well, that perhaps could have been done with the careful use of guile, wit, and some judicious double-crossing. But here was this Falk jamming up the deal and tangling everything into a snarl.

Devlin turned and regarded Quentin Falk with bleak dislike. As between the businessman and the Mexican bandit, he preferred the bandit. Rico, damn his stained soul, was at least stimulating in a blackguardly sort of way. He was utterly without conscience or scruples, wily and treacherous as a Comanche, and Devlin had no illusions about that ten thousand in gold. It was bait with a sharp hook in it. It was against all Rico's principles to pay good cash for what he wanted.

But this Quentin Falk. There was nothing human about him, nothing admirable. You could admire the raiding wolf for its daring, and the panther for its sleek and competent killing prowess, and even the snake for its handsome skin. But this big flaccid-faced frog—

The green eyes, round and unblinking, met Devlin's. "I am Quentin Falk. You are the gunman known as Preacher Devlin, I believe." The tone was that of a man of authority interviewing a prospective employee. "I wish to hire you, Devlin, to help me protect the Mullarky girl."

"I'm not for hire," Devlin said curtly.

The round eyes continued to regard him. "I wish to see that buffalo horn placed where it will be safe."

"So does Rico," Devlin drawled, "an' he got here first."

"What was his offer?" questioned Falk bluntly.

"Ten thousand."

"I'll double it!"

Devlin went to the bar and poured himself another drink. "You bidding for the girl or the horn?"

"Both!" Falk drew a bulky wallet from an inside pocket, and tapped it. "I'll pay cash on the line, in thousand-dollar bills, as soon as we clear town."

Devlin cast an eye at the wallet, and sighed over his drink. Bigger bait, with a bigger hook in it somewhere. But it was a challenging temptation, and his sigh was for his departing discretion.

"A few years ago, back along the Arizona line, a big piece of range was thrown open for homesteading," he remarked. "The homesteaders came in, but Mex raiders gave 'em trouble. Finally, a big gringo cow company sent in a tough fightin' bunch —to protect the homesteaders, they said. Last time I passed that way, the same company was runnin' its cows all over that range, an' homesteaders were as scarce as Mex raiders!"

Falk nodded, unruffled. "This country," he declared heavily, "is for strong men—men of power and vision. It is no place for poverty-stricken homesteaders and picayune cow settlers, nor for insolent Mexican impostors!"

"Nor for a girl who happens to have legal inheritance rights to it, either, hm-m-m?" Devlin appended.

Falk remained imperturbable. "My company will buy those rights from her," he returned.

That, in Devlin's view, was doubtful, considering the way Falk's hirelings had attacked the stage carrying Moira and the buffalo horn. He began

revising his estimation of Quentin Falk. The man was a hypocrite, but a dangerous and ruthless hypocrite.

Falk put away his wallet with an air of finality. "Twenty thousand dollars is as high as I will go," he stated flatly. "Take it or leave it, but I warn you I'll stop at nothing to get what I want! I'll send in every man I've got. I'll turn this town into a battleground before I let that Mexican win his way!"

He wasn't bluffing. His tone held no bluster. Rather, it was matter-of-fact and coldly positive. Devlin leaned his back against the bar, studying the Don's Mexican fighters out in the plaza. Any chance was better than waiting here for the coming explosion, trapped in the core of it and blocked on all sides. And there was the girl to be considered.

"Aren't any o' Rico's men watching the rear?" he queried.

"Yes," responded Falk, "but they'll be taken care of."

Devlin nodded. "All right. Tell your guns to be ready. Rico's boys will be right on tap soon's they catch onto us, an' we'll have to jump fast!"

VI.

Rory stood near the head of the stairs, his right hand hovering over his holster.

Devlin, climbing the stairs, said quietly: "Pity you didn't hang around downstairs a mite longer Irish. You'd have heard something to set you thinking."

"I heard enough!" countered Rory grimly. "Keep your hands in sight, Devlin, an' stay where you are!"

Devlin shook his head, and didn't halt. "I'm comin' on up, but don't worry about my hands. You didn't hear half of it. We've got to check out o' here with that girl the best way we can. I think I can convince you o' that, without having to use a gun on you."

He raised his hands shoulder high. "There isn't much time to argue, but—" He tripped on the top stair, lurched, and threw out his arms for balance.

Rory, taking a backward step out of Devlin's way, opened his mouth to say something, but he never got it out. One long black-clad arm flashed out, and the fist that struck him between the eyes came too fast for any defensive reaction. His head snapped back, and the next smashing blow caught him under the jaw. There was no need for a third.

Devlin bent over Rory and took his gun. "Hope I didn't break his fool neck; that girl'd kill me!" he muttered.

A low murmur of voices issued from Huitado's room. Devlin went directly to it and thrust open the door without knocking. The first thing he looked at was the menacing muzzle of a cumbersome old smooth-bore gun, trained straight for his middle, and it occurred to him that Rory must have spoken of the talk he had heard in the barroom.

It was an old-fashioned muzzle loader with a yard-long barrel, and it was held in the bony hands of Don Ambrosio Huitado. The old caballero had evidently just finished the lengthy job of loading it, for on his desk lay the ramrod and gun box of black powder, lead balls, percussion caps and wads. Behind Huitado stood Moira, holding the pistol she had taken from the knocked-out man outside on the boardwalk.

Devlin blandly eyed them. "Your Irishman," he told Moira, "has been taken sick, somehow. He's lyin' out there on his back. Seems like somebody ought to look after him."

"Oh, mercy!" The girl rushed past him and sped from the room.

Devlin thoughtfully regarded Huitado and his big old muzzle loader. The leather case containing the buffalo horn lay on one of the crowded bookshelves that took up all the wall space. The room was a hodgepodge of dusty volumes, bundles of yellowed papers and letter files, with the massive old desk cramping the cot into one corner and a few articles of clothing hung up carelessly. How the old lawyer ever found what he wanted in the jumble was a mystery.

"What d'you figure to shoot with that smoke pole?" Devlin asked pleasantly.

"You, you scoundrel, if you try to betray that girl!" came the prompt reply.

"Reckon you could hit me with it?"

"In my youth, sir, I hunted buffalo with this same weapon!"

"Do tell," murmured Devlin, and moved over to the window. From this end of the building he got a view of the hotel's dobe-walled corral and the full length of the alley that ran between it and the back of the building.

To the right, at the open end of the alley, some of Rico's fighters were grouped on watch. Whoever stepped out of the back door into that alley would step directly into the range of their ready carbines. It posed a knotty problem. One of the corral gates faced the back door across the alley, but it would take more than a leap to reach it. The other gate, on the far side of the corral, opened out into one of the back streets that led to the valley road.

There were men in the corral. Devlin settled his gaze on three whom he recognized, and ticked off their names in his mind: Nort Ebster, Little Cole, Nevada Jones, a close-knit trigger team that charged

high, but always delivered according to contract. With their horses they flanked a shining new surrey with a fringed top and spindly wheels, and they had saddled Devlin's black in readiness for the breakout. Quiet men, these three, when on a job. Quiet and efficiently competent, but it didn't seem possible that they and the few others in sight were all the force Falk had on hand. Falk had talked as if he could call up an army at a moment's notice.

Devlin turned back to Huitado. "Helluva mess o' books you got here," he observed. "I never could quite decide whether you lawyers have 'em for show or use. For show, probably, to impress the customers. Now, take this one here, for instance—"

It didn't happen to be a book which he dragged carelessly from a cluttered shelf, though it looked like an extra big one. It turned out to be a collapsible letter-filing case, and it fell open in his hands like a concertina, strewing papers at his feet. "Blast it, that fooled me!" he murmured, spilling more papers while he tried to close the case.

"Clumsy lout!" snapped Huitado angrily, and reached to take it from him.

"Sorry," Devlin apologized solemnly, letting it fall and neatly plucking the smoothbore gun from the Spaniard with a darting swoop of his hand. He shook out the percussion cap and tossed the gun up onto the highest bookshelf close to the ceiling.

When he left, Huitado was swearing in Spanish and clambering up onto his desk to get at the gun. The old lawyer was too thoroughly mad to notice that Devlin carried Moira's leather box under his arm as he walked out.

Rory was just beginning to come to, but his senses were still too dazed to be of much use to him.

"Look at his poor face!" mourned Moira, sitting in unladylike manner on the floor and holding his head in her lap. Rory had a bluish bump between his eyes, and another on his jaw.

"Must've hit it on something," said Devlin. He got an arm under Rory and hauled him to his feet. "Girl, pick up your gun an' follow us. We're checkin' out o' here."

He saw the shrinking doubt in Moira's face. She was no fool, this girl, and could not easily be led. Soon, if her distrust crystallized, she would be raising a ruckus and maybe shooting off that pistol at him.

"Keep your chin up, Irish," he muttered to her, and for once some of the chill harshness was absent from his voice. He even smiled down at her, crookedly but genuinely. "He's not hurt bad. Are you scared to trust me?"

She tried to match his smile, but it was a tremulous attempt. "Yes; but I'm more scared not to!"

They went down the stairs to the back door that opened out into the alley. Devlin, half supporting Rory, looked out, but only once. After that one look, a carbine whammed its warning note along the alley, and the bullet screeched off the wall. Through the corral gateway they could see Falk's men, still grouped around the surrey, waiting, shielded from Rico's fighters by the high adobe wall. The trigger team—Nort Ebster, Little Cole and Nevada Jones—formed the nucleus of the Falk group, and stood together, saying nothing while the rest waited for their cue.

Nort Ebster, blond and bearded, with more the appearance of a solid Mormon farmer than a kingpin gunman, raised a hand to Devlin and wigwagged a finger briefly. Devlin nodded, understanding it as a signal that something was about to happen. He met the blond gunman's contemplative gaze, and drew from it a sure knowledge that the man was sizing him up with professional care. The same expression lay cool and remote in the eyes of Little Cole and Nevada Jones. The trigger team had a job to do.

Heavy wheels suddenly began crunching nearby, and a stir ran through the Falk group. Devlin chanced another look down the alley, and grasped the significance. The high-sided Mexican cart, parked between the hotel and the blacksmith's shed next door, was being rolled out with a rush, blocking off this part of the alley from the sight of Rico's fighters at the other end.

Devlin handed Moira the leather box, leaving his right arm free while he helped support Rory with his left.

"Come on!" he muttered, and lunged for the corral as carbines erupted a ragged volley down the alley. Mexican voices, high-pitched and hoarse, yelled the alarm, and from the plaza broke a pattering rush of running feet. The Mexican gunhands, following the orders of their absent Don Ricardo, were storming to the attack at the first sign of the break.

Due either to the crash of gunfire or the fresh air, or both, Rory came to his full senses with a jerk and a grunt, just as Devlin pitched him into the surrey after Moira had leaped into it with the leather box. He reared up, glaring about him, and bared his teeth like a bristling dog having a bad dream, but he tumbled off balance when Gear in the driver's seat slashed a whistling cut at the team. The surrey took off at a rattling pace across the corral for the back street gateway.

Devlin whipped a long leg over his waiting black, at the same time thumbing the animal in a dancing circle so that he could keep the trigger team under his eye. A rapid glance showed him a seamed and angry face peering over a long barrel at one of the hotel's upper windows.

"Gringo scoundrel!" howled Don Ambrosio Huitado, and the big smoothbore boomed.

The dry hiss of the bullet came very close, for all that Devlin was a moving target. "Hell, he can shoot the thing, at that!" muttered the gun fighter, and got his horse lined out in a dead run for the back street.

The trigger team had whirled at the roaring report. A gun flashed in Ebster's hand and blared three times. The upper window shattered into pieces and became vacant. When Devlin looked back again, all three of the team were shooting, but not at the window. Some of Rico's Mexicans had reached the alley gate, and the trio was gunning its way out of the corral.

The rest of Falk's men were riding fast out of the corral and splitting up when they reached the back street, some swinging off to the left and others to the right. But Gear kept the bouncing surrey rocketing straight ahead. Devlin held his black to the course of the surrey, with the gunman trio thundering along in his rear. The corral swarmed with Rico's fighters now, some on foot and some riding, pouring around from the plaza and coming in yelling pursuit. Others raced through the side streets, riding furiously to cut off the fugitives before they could get out of town.

Devlin was gaining on the surrey. As it lurched around a bend, he saw Rory rise up and hurl himself at Gear. He saw something else, too—shadowy forms and the motionless muzzles of guns waiting in every doorway and window along both sides of the narrow street. And now he knew why Falk hadn't displayed many men in the corral. His biggest force lay in silent ambush, while Rico's Mexicans were being lured into the trap.

Devlin rounded the curve in time to see both Rory and Gear roll out of the surrey and land tangled and struggling on the ground, while the hurtling vehicle continued its headlong way full into the path of a half dozen men who ran out to intercept it. Moira had hold of the lines, tugging vainly in an effort to halt the runaway team. When she saw the men ahead she groped down on the floor and came up with her gun.

Devlin was ready to make a deal with Rico if he could, but he kept his hand close to his gun —just on general principles.

Devlin drew up in a jump and spun his horse around so fast it stood quivering with its haunches crouched close to the ground. Hoofs pounded on his course, and around the bend swerved the trigger team, Ebster in front. They, too, drew up all in a jump, and for an instant sat image-still. And then, as if all were actuated by a single mind, they broke into movement.

There was no warning word, no preliminary signal, either on their part or on Devlin's. They were gunmen, each with his acutely trained sense of timing, of knowing when and why to dispense with the waste of preamble. Devlin's hands slashed under

his somber coat and out again, and his pair of long-barreled guns roared their first discharge before the coat settled back into place. He heeled the black at the same time.

Ebster, a gun already in his hand, reined his horse rearing high and fired around its upflung head, one of the tricks he was famous for, but its efficacy didn't take into account any sudden charge on the part of the target. The black bounded forward at the dig of heels, slid aslant at another kick and slammed broadside into the rearing horse, while Devlin, riding in one stirrup and half out of his saddle, got in two more shots.

The collision wrecked the smooth teamwork of the trio and piled everything up in confusion. Little Cole, shooting and sliding out of his saddle, tried to dismount faster as Ebster and his horse toppled over backward on him. He could have made it, but a bullet slapped his foot and slowed him down. Ebster's horse rolled on him, though the gunman himself fell clear. Nevada Jones, always reputed to be a game man, elected to stick to his seat and shoot it out.

Beyond the bend, a hammering crash of exploding cartridges suddenly drowned out the noise of a running mob. Falk had pulled the trigger of his ambush. Back along the street, too, where the surrey raced, a pistol duel raged. At the back of Devlin's mind, as he flattened over his horse and thumbed a shot at Nevada Jones, bobbed a recollection of Rico's earnest desire to hold off trouble until his own good time. Rico was due for a shock when he got back from La Estrella. This town had ripped the lid off for fair.

Nevada Jones bowed himself out of the fight and didn't straighten up after, and Devlin slung a gun back in line with Ebster. But Ebster lay in the street with both hands empty. He had dropped his gun in the fall. He had another in his left holster, but he didn't seem disposed to reach for it, and his eyes were closed.

VII.

Along the street, Rory ran at a limping trot after the surrey, with Gear's gun. The surrey had broken through the group of men, but one man hung to the heads of the team, dragging his feet and trying to bring them to a standstill, while Moira laid onto him with the whip. The rest, except for two who had lost all interest in the world, were swapping shots with the advancing Rory.

Rory was still going on at his limping trot when Devlin bore down on him from behind. The gun master leaned out from his saddle and grabbed his shirt. "Hang on here, an' we'll bust up that party the quicker!" he growled, and they swept on together, guns blazing.

The fellow hanging onto the team turned loose when he got the animals halted, only to discover that he had no support left within striking distance. Two more of his group were down and another stumbled slowly away, while a pair of wild men who had no business still being alive came charging at the surrey. The man threw up his hands and bolted. Rory sprang up into the surrey, and Moira laid on the whip.

"Turn off at the next corner," Devlin called, riding behind. "Street's blocked!" He was right about that. Another bunch of riders swung in from the valley road, coming at a gallop into town. All Falk's forces were closing in on this street, drawing the noose tighter around Rico's trapped Mexicans fighting for their lives back there around the bend.

The next side street ran back toward the plaza, but there was no choice. Moira jerked on the off line, and the surrey careened around the corner on two wheels, with Rory holding on and chopping shots at the bunch. Devlin scraped a stirrup getting around the corner, drew the black to a leg-braced halt, and quit the saddle. The town was ablaze with battle, riderless horses stampeding through the streets and gunfire crashing out in volleys, but the well-trained black would stand there with dangling reins and cocked ears until hell swallowed it.

The bunch had flung a scattering of shots at the surrey before it turned off, and now their intent was pursuit. They were forty yards from the corner, riding in a packed mass, when Devlin poked his guns around the adobe and hammered them empty of their last shells. He didn't wait to see the resulting chaos of horses and riders plunging in tangled disaster over the fallen leaders, but the ugly noises of it satisfied him. He slapped the black and mounted on the run.

Nothing could be seen of the surrey when he burst into the plaza, and he had no way of telling which direction it had taken. Narrow streets branched out from all sides of it and at all angles. A Mexican reeled on foot across Devlin's course, pursued by two Falk men. Other remnants of the back-street battle raged here and there, where some of the Rico party had broken out of the trap. Devlin, with empty guns and no time to reload, whirled off to the nearest street and clattered on through it.

All the streets in Eladrevo frayed out into a fringe of trails outside the town, and the trails in turn became tributaries to the main roads and paths of the valley. A Pueblo Indian in cotton trousers and rag-bound hair, resting with his string of wood-laden burros in the scant shade of a lone piñon, regarded Devlin with alarmed and distrustful dark eyes.

At the Preacher's short query, he pointed with

his chin. "That way, señor . . . and men riding after it."

Devlin threw him a coin and touched the black to its long lope, reloading his guns as he rode. The country ahead was a succession of low hills, rising higher toward the Peloncillo range, the knolls blackly peppered with piñon and the hollows flooded brightly with the yellow-blossoming chamisa clumps. Soon he picked out the dust of the surrey, and then the surrey itself, appearing and vanishing along the trail that made its winding way through the hills. Rory and Moira, foreign to the country, didn't know where they were going, but they were streaking along at a breakneck gait.

It was only when he got within hailing distance of the bouncing surrey that Devlin caught sight of its pursuers. They were Falk men, Gear among them, and they weren't following the variations of the trail. They rocked into sight over the shoulder of a hill, and pounded down the slant at an angle that put them in a good position to head off the fugitives.

Moira stood up in the surrey, lashing the team, and the flat report of Rory's gun cracked through the drumming of hoofbeats. Farther along, the trail dipped before it rose up the cutaway bank of a long escarpment, and Devlin judged the dip to be an arroyo crossing. Moira kept the surrey plunging straight on for the dip, regardless. She could handle a team, but she wasn't quite familiar with the unexpected features of this kind of country.

Horsemen wearing crossed bandoleers and high-peaked sombreros bobbed up on the trail at the top of the escarpment, just as the surrey went hurtling down into the dip. There was a splintering crash, and water splashed up in two fountain sprays. The wrecked surrey bounced into sight again for a brief instant, somersaulting end over end with both front wheels smashed to the hubs, while the squealing team bolted on up the escarpment alone, dragging broken leathers.

The slim and dapper figure of Don Ricardo detached itself from the horsemen up on the escarpment, and came riding down on a high-headed palomino. The Don didn't trouble to shoot, but his men did. He had only his small bodyguard squad with him, but they had the advantage of position and surprise. Their carbines burst alive with a chattering roar, upsetting two Falk riders and sending the rest racing for cover.

The Don reappeared from the arroyo, going back the way he had come, with Moira slung limply over his saddle and the leather case under his arm. Devlin cursed, lining out after him, and it came to him that the luck of the Irish had turned pretty sour when it led the surrey along the trail for La Estrella, of all places.

Rory lay gurgling and drowning under the wreckage of the surrey, and Devlin paused long enough to reach down and yank him out, dripping wet. The gun master hauled him half across the saddle, legs dangling, and put the black up the escarpment bank with a rush. Behind him, the Falk party, reorganized, was already in pursuit.

The powerful black topped the bank, struck level ground, and stretched out into its swinging lope. Ahead, the trail ran on into a forest of pine and shimmering aspen. Flat adobe roofs and the jutting ends of viga rafters were visible through the trees, with here and there a glimpse of white-washed walls, and at one point a church tower and copper bell.

The forest turned out to be a thick windbreak, sheltering the walled hacienda of La Estrella. The hacienda, of sprawling Spanish-Mexican plan and proportions, was more of a self-contained village than a rancho. Here, from the higher ground of the windbreak that partly overlooked the encircling wall, could be seen the large ranchhouse, the workers' quarters, barns, commissary and church. The thick adobe wall was typical. Built in the long ago for defense against marauding Apaches, it made a fortress and sanctuary of the great hacienda in times of need. There were doors in it, but only one gate wide enough to allow the passage of ox wagon, cart or carriage.

Don Ricardo and his men had gained the sanctuary, and the main gate was creaking shut when Devlin rode through the windbreak fringe into the wide and level clearing outside the wall, and headed for the gate.

"For shame, caballeros! Where's your Spanish hospitality!" he hailed. "Here's company!"

His hard flippancy appealed to the sardonic strain in the Mexican mind. They let him push on through. He quirked a fraternal grin at them, and helped slam the massive gate. Don Ricardo was down at the far end of the low-walled driveway leading from the main gate back past the big house to the patio and village. With much gallantry and a tight arm he supported Moira, who leaned dazedly against him as he led her up the steps into the little stone church. He glanced back at the Preacher, and spoke to some of the men who were with him.

Two of them walked back and met Devlin. They nodded at Rory, sagging in the saddle. "The gringo is hurt?" one inquired solicitously. "Let us take care of him, señor."

Devlin let them take Rory between them, seeing no special point in arguing the matter. "He's some banged up, but he'll get over that," he remarked. "Put my horse in a corral, too, will you? Water

him an' loosen cinch, but leave the saddle on. *Gracias, hombres."*

He went on into the big house. Its furnishings spoke eloquently of Spanish elegance, grace of living, and the long security of many years. From a window Devlin watched Rory carried into the church. Rico and the others came out soon, and locked the carved oaken door. The little stone church, it seemed, made a tight prison. Devlin was making himself comfortable with a wine decanter and a cigar when Rico entered.

"How's the girl?" he queried casually.

"A little stunned by her fall," answered the Don. He placed the leather box on a table, keeping one hand on it, and stared reflectively at the Preacher. "What happened in Eladrevo?"

"Plenty!" said Devlin, and cocked his head, listening. "Not much shooting going on out there. How long can you hold out here, Rico?"

Rico shrugged. "Does it matter? When my good fighting men get here—"

"Your good comrades are *muy* good right now—good an' dead, most of 'em!" drawled Devlin. "Falk ran an ambush on 'em."

Disbelief brought a smile to the Don's lips. *"Es verdad?"* he murmured politely. "And so you brought the girl and her buffalo horn and that Irish trouble maker here at once, yes? Ah, you are my true friend! And how fortunate it was that you knew the way here to La Estrella!"

His mockery was obvious. He turned as a scarred old Mexican entered, heavy spurs dragging and armed like a pirate. "Yes, Lorenzo?"

"The gringos have drawn off into the trees, chief," reported Lorenzo.

Don Ricardo shrugged lightly. "No matter, Lorenzo, I am told that our men are many dead, smashed by the Falk gringos. What think you of that?"

"Bah! We shall see how dead they are, when they come and hunt like coyotes these ones who hide in the trees!" snorted Lorenzo, and stalked out.

Don Ricardo flashed his engaging smile at Devlin. "I fear my good segundo does not believe," he apologized silkily. "But, even if true, it is of small consequence. There will always be good men to follow Rico." He slapped the leather box gayly. "And here I have the greatest ace card—the grant deed! Amigo, I thank you with all my heart!"

With a flourish he sprang the brass lock and flung open the lid. "The sweet señorita in the church shall be rewarded for bringing to me the famous powder horn of—"

His gay prattle broke off. He stood blinking down into the box, and for a moment looked almost pitifully bewildered and disappointed. Finally the angry color rushed to his face and he choked out one word.

"Empty!"

Devlin craned his neck and peered. "Damned if it isn't," he agreed, and sipped his wine.

Don Ricardo snapped up his head, glaring. "A trick!" he swore. *"Mil diablos!* The horn of the *cibolo* no is *aqui!"* He was so excited he stuttered and forgot some of his perfect English. *"Fuego!* That girl she makes the trick to make the fool of me!" He started for the door in a passion, but froze to a halt, seeing Devlin's hands slip under the long black coat.

"Goin' to church, Rico?" Devlin said softly. "Gen'rally speaking, I'd approve—but not this time!"

He watched the glitter brighten in the Don's eyes, heard his sharply indrawn breath, saw the muscles of his lips move and ripple.

"No, Rico, don't call in your cutthroat buddies!" he warned. "Don't do it, Rico—or we'll be settling an old question we've both always wondered about!"

For a moment it looked as if the Don would take him up on it and stake all on his fast draw. But he met the emotionless, nerve-tingling stare of the coldly blank gray eyes, and it did to him what it always did, putting an inner query into his confidence. Very slowly, he drew out his gold case and chose a cigarette. He lighted it, blew smoke delicately through his fine nostrils, and then he smiled and was the cynically amused caballero again.

Lazily, he took down a guitar, returned with extravagantly mincing step to a couch, and seated himself. For a while, cigarette in mouth and head resting indolently against cushions, he idly fingered the strings. His attitude spoke of dreamy patience, an enjoyment of untroubled hours, and no thought for tomorrow. He finally struck into the galloping rhythm of *"Adios, Mi Chaparrita,"* and sang softly to it:

"Adios, mi chaparrita,
No llores por tu Pancho—"

VIII.

Devlin sat with his back to the wall, watching the door and the Don. The music was not unpleasant. Daylight faded from the tall, narrow windows, the chill of night crept in, and still Rico sang on, parading an amazing repertory of songs. Devlin knew what he was waiting for. The Don fully expected his army of ragged followers to come storming in from Eladrevo, and it was useless trying to convince him that they had been defeated and scattered.

Old Lorenzo jingled noisily in, peered through the gloom at his singing chief, then at Devlin, and scratched his grizzled head in puzzlement. There

they sat in the dark and the night chill like shy lovers, the breadth of the room between them, and Don Ricardo serenading this big devil-eyed gringo.

Foolishness. Old Lorenzo grunted, heaved himself up onto the long table, and lighted the huge copper lamp that hung from a rafter. As he trimmed the wick to a steady glow, a reminding shot cracked from a rifle out in the windbreak. A bullet crashed through a tall window, grazed the lamp, and smacked into the opposite wall.

"Fuego!" muttered Lorenzo with annoyance, and got off the table, while Don Ricardo chuckled and winked pleasantly at Devlin. The old segundo sniffed indignantly, knelt by the enormous fireplace, and kindled a charcoal fire. With a last look around, he stamped out, and they heard him banging pots and pans in the kitchen. Don Ricardo kept no servants but his ruffianly fighters.

The Don was in the swing of "The Devil Has Hauled Him Away," when a sudden flurry of shooting exploded outside the wall of the hacienda. It came from the windbreak, and with it came shouts and a confused rumble of many hoofs. The running hoofbeats drew rapidly closer, louder, and the shouting voices resolved into chanting cries.

"Viva Don Ricardo! *Viva* De Risa, the Laughing One, *Patron* of La Estrella!"

The Don leaped lightly to his feet, eyes aglow, and tossed aside the guitar. He looked at Devlin triumphantly. "Behold, amigo, the ghosts of my dead men come riding back to me, yes?" he crowed, and laughed aloud in his exultance. *"Hola,* Lorenzo! Open the gates for our wayward children! Tell them all to come to me, and I shall show them a man who objects to the going to church!"

Devlin rose, hands under his coat, listening to the noise outside in the darkness, for the moment incredulous and taken aback. He had seen Rico's men plunge into the back-street trap in Eladrevo, had heard them fighting hopelessly for their lives, had witnessed the remnants cut down while they fled across the plaza. Yet here they came riding home to Rico, shouting victory. It didn't make sense.

The boom of the big gate sounded as it was dragged wide open, and the men of the hacienda bodyguard were laughing and shouting to the incoming party. The shouts abruptly changed to startled yells. Shots roared in the driveway, and stamping hoofs came thundering on toward the house.

Devlin dove at the door and slammed it shut. He shoved in the big iron bolts and whirled on the Don with his guns out. "You blasted fool, let's hear you sing now!" he snarled. "They're not your cussed segundos! That's the whole Falk mob, an' you've let 'em in! By Satan, Falk's done it again!"

The Don, stunned, turned pale. But he hooked out his guns and acted promptly. He slashed a shot through a window, and a dark shape, lunging by, went down with a crash.

"But . . . but my men!" Rico muttered. "Where are they?"

"In hell, where you'll soon join 'em—you an' your fool guitar!" Devlin flung at him. "Didn't I tell you?"

"Yes . . . yes," groaned the Don. "But how should I know when to believe such a liar!"

The invaders were already smashing doors open and storming through the buildings of the hacienda. From the racket, they had some trouble with the church door, but soon a voice yelled out, "Here's the gal—yeah, an' that Irish knot-head, too! All right, you, git your paws up or eat lead!"

The noise quieted down some. Then Falk's voice sounded outside the house. "Devlin . . . Risa . . . I want that powder horn. You can't hold out in there, and you know it. I've already sent a request for cavalry troops to come in and take control of this valley. Come out, give up your guns and that powder horn, and I'll give you both an hour's start for the border!"

"Never!" vowed Don Ricardo, and fired through the bolted door.

"Never's a right long time, Rico," Devlin growled. He leaned forward and smacked the Don neatly over the head with a gun barrel. Then he opened the door and stepped back.

Falk came in slowly, watchfully. Among the gunmen crowding at his heels was Nort Ebster, looking more than ever like a sober Mormon farmer despite a blood-soiled shirt, bandaged chest, and face drained white and sick. Gear, the puppet sheriff, was among them, too, his eyes stealthy, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. They had Rory and Moira with them, pushing them ahead.

Devlin had retreated to a shadowy corner. He spoke from there, quietly but compellingly. "Falk, I don't like crowds!"

Falk paused and mutely raised a hand. Those still outside remained there. The rest silently spread out inside to block doorway and windows. Falk gazed stonily about the room, at Don Ricardo lying on the floor, and finally at Devlin.

"Where is the powder horn?" he demanded in his flat voice.

"Not here," said Devlin. "There's just one man in the world who knows where it is—and I'm that man!"

There was no necessity to enlarge upon the implications. Falk paced to the table, unhurried and deliberate, and drew out his oversized wallet. "The powder horn is no longer of any value to anybody but me," he stated. "I have here Huitado's papers. I have possession of the property—and the girl!"

"There's still law left in the country," Devlin reminded him.

Falk nodded. "Yes, and I make use of it. Troops from Fort Bayard should arrive here in two or three days. Long before then, the girl will have signed her rights over to my company. While the soldiers are restoring law and order, the courts will be ratifying my claim of ownership of the grant. I shall even ask for military aid in legally removing from my property all undesirable characters and trespassers, such as squatters and troublesome Mexicans—and renegade gunmen! You see, Devlin, even the law is on my side. Can you say as much?"

"We-ell—maybe not," Devlin granted, understating the fact by a wide margin. Whenever he and the law bent in the same direction, it was sheer coincidence. "What makes you think the girl will sign away her rights to you? And what would become of her after she did it?"

Falk offered no reply to that. He opened his wallet, exposing a thick sheaf of bills. "Twenty thousand was the price we agreed on, I believe. The offer still stands."

"Cash in advance?"

"No!"

Devlin shrugged. "All right. I'll need my horse. Be back in about an hour. But don't rig up a 'buscado on me, Falk, or you'll never see that powder horn. I want the gate left open, the driveway empty, an' no crowd standing by to jump me. And have the cash ready on hand."

"I'm a man of my word," retorted Falk heavily.

"That's as may be," Devlin murmured, and left, aware of Nort Ebster's brooding stare following him as he passed on out of the house. The last of the trigger team had a bitter score to settle with him when the time came. So had all the others, that was plain, from the looks they gave him as he got his horse from the corral and rode out of La Estrella.

Going through the windbreak, Devlin hipped around and looked back for signs of stalkers following him. Here the ground was higher than the level of the hacienda, but all he could see were the night-grayed bulks of the wall and buildings, only one light visible and that coming from the big copper lamp in the ranchhouse, framed by the high and narrow window.

Nothing moved on the bare ground outside the adobe wall, and Devlin rode on, but with his mind far from easy. Falk was right, and he hadn't been bluffing. He could call the law to his aid, and he had done it. With all his flabby looks, the man knew how to make himself invulnerable, all powerful. Soon this country would be overrun with soldiers, gunmen, deputies, and probably plenty of law from Lordsburg. The prospect held no enticement for a man of broad-minded views and a high cash bounty value. In the meantime, Falk had everything pretty well tied down.

But it was the things that Falk had left unsaid that held the more menacing significance—as baleful as the bitter stare of Nort Ebster, and as definite as the silent animosity of the gun mob. That girl would not have a pleasant time, before or after she signed away her inheritance rights. The round green eyes of Quentin Falk lacked even Rico's mocking but human quality of decent chivalry.

IX.

It was well over an hour later when Devlin hailed the gate and heard the rattle of the crossbar being withdrawn. The place looked just the same, with the single copper lamp burning and all else in darkness. The gate swung in, and for the second time he entered La Estrella.

The men who had opened the gate walked ahead of him down the driveway, leaving the gate open. Before dismounting at the house, Devlin watched their figures drift on into the darkness in the direction of the corrals. He took note of the fact that they did not look back at him after their first long inspection. Small things were straws in the wind, to be studied with care. That the whole place was under a hush he noted, too, a hush that was not natural, considering the number of men here. He divined it as an evidence of stilled listening, and probably of watching, though he could pick out no unexplained shadows.

Under other conditions, Devlin would have backed for the gate with his guns out. All his training and instincts joined in screaming warning, the more insistent because signs of danger had been so carefully erased from this place.

He left his horse standing in the driveway with reins dangling and head pointed toward the gate, and stepped lightly up to the door of the house. He thrust the door open quickly, standing well back and aside from the released fan of lamplight.

Falk sat at one end of the long table, nearest the fireplace, and Moira at the other. Rory stood against a wall, his battered face white and eyes blazing. Near him, Don Ricardo, stripped of his guns, hatless, a patch of his black hair spiky with dried blood, tried to appear grandly nonchalant about the whole business. Gear had them under his sawed-off shotgun. Nort Ebster lounged in a tooled-leather chair. There was no one else in the room.

All looked at the door as it swung open. Gear began a motion that was automatic, then caught himself and relaxed. Nort Ebster moved nothing but his head, and after one slow scrutiny gazed

ruminantly across the room into the fire's red glow.

Falk, without rising, said flatly: "Come in, Devlin."

The whole scene was too placid, too restrained—too perfect in its acting, so that its very perfection rang a false note.

Devlin stepped inside, left the door open, and placed himself by it with his back to the wall. He ran his glance rapidly around at the high windows, but the lamplight shone on them and turned them into mirrors. The walled driveway outside, he judged, might be the only part of the hacienda not yet covered by hidden men, but even it could be swept by gunfire from the dark corrals, and the light from the doorway would make such sharp-shooting fairly easy.

The waiting silence grew oppressive, and Devlin did not choose to be the first to break it. Falk finally spoke again, his round eyes pinched small by a frown.

"Well, did you get it?" he demanded. It was his first sign of impatience.

"Sure," murmured Devlin, and Don Ricardo, staring bitterly at him, narrowed his eyes in sharp disbelief.

But the Don changed expression when Devlin brought his right hand into sight from behind his back, holding the buffalo horn. "Sure," said Devlin again. "Here—take the damn thing!" He tossed it spinning with a flip of his hand.

It was a high throw. Falk, not prepared for it, bumped the table in trying to make the catch. The horn spun past, well above his reaching hands, and sailed into the fireplace behind him, scattering the neat charcoal fire. Falk floundered around, upsetting his chair, and uttered an oath of dismay.

"Gear . . . Ebster! Get it!"

The rosin-packed end of the horn caught with a splutter and flared up like a struck match, and both Rory and Don Ricardo acted fast, each in his own way. Rory stuck out a foot, and Gear, jumping to obey orders, sprawled his length on the floor. The Don, for his part, promptly dove for the horn and aimed a kick at Falk, who also lunged for the thing. Both got hold of it and reared up, fighting and kicking for possession.

"Damn you, Rico, leave that thing—" Devlin had no time to finish.

Nort Ebster, his mind set on one purpose, bounded up out of his chair with both guns clearing his bolsters, and in the same instant the blazing buffalo horn exploded. It exploded like a bomb between Falk and the Don, and while the roar and blinding flash of it still filled the room with sound and smoke, a single shot boomed somewhere outside the hacienda wall.

The big copper lamp fell straight as a plummet, its hang chain cut cleanly by the accurate ball aimed from the windbreak. As it fell, the rush of wind guttered the flame high up the glass chimney, and Devlin drew and fired before the lamp crashed itself out on the table below. A low glow remained in the smoke-filled room, coming from the scattered charcoal fire, and the figures of Rory and Moira cut across it, charging for the door. Rory had Gear's shotgun, and was leading the way.

A window broke, then another and another, and men outside cursed as they took chance shots into the darkened room. This 'buscado was all blown up. The explosion and the shattered lamp had put a crimp into a perfect plan for murder.

Somebody blundered into Devlin. Not Falk. Devlin, making a hasty search, had found Falk lying on his face, very quiet and slack of muscle. Nor was it Ebster, who had quit shooting. It was Don Ricardo, stumbling about and moaning softly with his hands to his face. Devlin caught hold of him and dragged him along to the door. They both barged into Rory, standing close to the house while Moira's heels tapped a running patter toward the main gate.

"Get out o' here, Irish!" growled Devlin. He slung the helpless Don onto the waiting black, and vaulted up after him into the saddle. Men were coming on the run into the driveway from the rear, shouting for somebody to shut the gate.

"Sure—right away," responded Rory, and the shotgun roared its buckshot load down the driveway. He flung the emptied weapon after it, grabbed a stirrup leather, and took off along with the black.

They caught up with Moira on the way to the windbreak. "Step along, girl," Devlin called to her. "I've seen you run that fast with only an Irishman after you! Sooner we make the windbreak the better."

Rory, hanging onto the horse and the girl, both, yelled back: "What good's the windbreak? Can't stand 'em off long from there!"

"Don't need to," answered Devlin. "Old Ambrose is somewhere along here with horses an' his buffalo gun. I finally convinced him my intentions are good. There he is! Good shot, that Ambrose!"

They piled onto the horses. "Borrowed 'em in town," Devlin mentioned, and didn't think it necessary to add that he took them from a hitch rack. "We'll head north an' keep goin'. Ambrose, d'you reckon you can ride all night?"

"In my youth, sir," stated Don Ambrosio, "I was known as an excellent—"

"*Bueno*," said Devlin. "Here's where you renew your youth. Hang an' rattle, Rico. Let's go!"

In the early light of morning they rested their weary and sweating horses. The Peloncillo lay far behind down the horizon, and ahead rose the

eroded red hogbacks of the Pyramid Mountains.

Don Ambrosio, stiff and sore, got down shakily and lay on the ground, mumbling something about old bones not being what they used to be. Rory helped Moira out of her saddle, and spread out a blanket for her to lie on, while Devlin squatted on his heels and searched his breast pocket for a cigar to chew on. But Don Ricardo stayed in the saddle, saying nothing. His hands were burned and powder-blackened, and he could not hold his reins, but he had managed somehow to wrap a handkerchief over his scorched and streaming eyes.

Rory gazed reflectively at Devlin. "I don't know if we ought to thank you or cuss you, but we're still alive an' that's a lot!" he observed. "How did you know where to find that powder horn, anyway?"

Devlin fished out a broken cigar, eyed it with some disparagement, and clamped the end between his teeth. "Well, you see," he murmured, "I took it out of the box in the first place, when I went to Ambrose's office, an' shoved it behind some books. Figured that was better than handing it over to Falk, so I just brought along the empty box. Ambrose didn't know that. He was some surprised when I went back last night an' pulled it out under his nose."

Don Ambrosio raised his tired head. "It is my profound opinion, sir," he announced, "that your methods and general conduct are not those of a scrupulous man!"

Devlin nodded gravely. "As a lawyer, sir, your opinion is no doubt based on wide experience."

"But what made the durn thing explode?" asked Rory, and Don Ricardo evinced a somber and macabre interest in the painful subject.

"The gunpowder," said Devlin blandly. "I dug the horn empty, filled it up with Ambrose's black powder, and plugged it up again with some o' the rosin. Figured to catch Falk with it. Ambrose was to shoot out the light as soon as he heard the bang. As it happened, it caught Rico, too. Tough luck, Rico!"

The Don swallowed, but still said nothing, and Devlin drew out a long wad of yellow wax. "Your grant deed's buried in this, just as Ambrose said it'd be," he remarked, and tossed it to Moira. "Just melt the wax off an' there it is. By the way, here are those papers they stole from Ambrose, too."

He drew the packet of papers from a large and fat leather wallet, initialed "Q. F.," and handed them over. "Take good care of 'em," he counseled, and put the wallet back into his pocket. "Ambrose will go with you to Lordsburg an' attend to everything. You may run into the troops an' some law on the way there. Let Ambrose do the talking. Inside a few weeks you'll be living at La Estrella, with all the Peloncillo for your stampin' ground, an' the devil only knows how many head o' cattle to look after. That right, Ambrose?"

Don Ambrosio opened one eye. "Decidedly. You may safely take possession of the Velasco estate as soon as the soldiers clean out those gunmen, Miss Moo-yarky. I shall be very happy to see you established there. You have a charming voice. Er . . . I shall ask no fee for my services, if you will agree to give me some quiet place on your estate to live."

"Why, of course!" cried Moira. She gazed next at Rory. "And . . . and—"

"Yeah, sure he will," said Devlin dryly. "Make a good ranch manager, too, maybe, if you keep him away from cards. That reminds me, Irish—that jackpot. Let's split it an' no more arguments."

He counted out seven hundred dollars and stood up. "Better not loaf here too long," he advised crisply. "Push on till you get to Lordsburg. No, I'm not goin' there. Hey, where's Rico gone?"

He caught up with the Don, half a mile away. Rico rode at a walk, chin on his chest, burned hands folded on the saddlehorn, eyes bandaged. He made a lonely figure, and a pathetic one. He heard Devlin draw near, and out of his new world of darkness he salvaged enough pride to lift his head and set his jaw.

"Where you goin', Rico?" Devlin inquired presently, after they had ridden in silence for a while.

Don Ricardo shrugged. "Where does one go when one is penniless and blind, and has many enemies? Does it matter? Where would you go?"

Devlin pondered on that. "I reckon I'd go to Juarez," he decided. "There's a feller there who'd hide Satan himself, providin' he had the cash to pay. Got a nice place, an' quite a few nice folks stay there, some of 'em permanent. One of 'em is a first-class doctor who'd know what to do about your eyes. I think he killed a big somebody an' can't go home, so he stays there an' always needs cash. Optical powder burns can be cured, as I know. Yes, that's where I'd go, Rico."

"Very good advice, no doubt," returned Don Ricardo politely. "And how would a blind man get there? And without money, how—"

"It just so happens," said Devlin, "I collected a cash fee last night, an' Juarez is right where I'm goin'. Care to come along?"

He reached out and gathered up the Don's reins. "I shouldn't do this, you ornery cuss," he growled, "but come on!"

Don Ricado's white teeth flashed in a smile, and Preacher Devlin grinned back, and they rode on together toward the Rio Grande and Juarez.

THE END.

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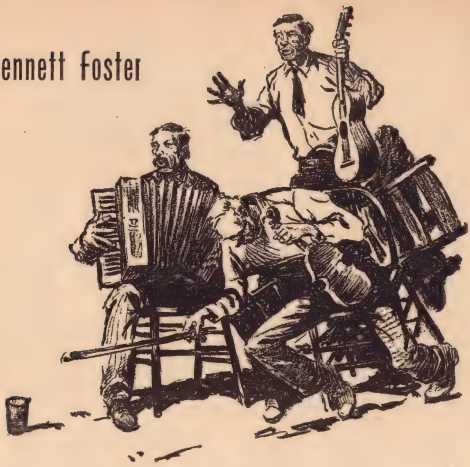
by Bennett Foster



Wade Jernigan was downright unwelcome in the Barrancoso but even with bushwhackers gunning for him, he showed his enemies that

BRAND INSPECTORS RIDE ALONE

I.

"Glen Mosby was a drunken danged fool, and Neil Gregory was a brave danged fool. I wonder what kind of a danged fool you'll be!" Old Roy Hardy had said.

Wade Jernigan let his horse stop at the top of the rise and, looking down over the Barrancoso country, remembered Roy Hardy's words and the expression on his grizzled old face as he spoke. The horse, a big, smoky buckskin, still fresh after the long trip, stripped leaves from buckbrush with strong yellow teeth, while his rider viewed the country below.

"Go on down, Percival," Jernigan commanded. "We'll see what kind of a danged fool I'll be!"

Percival started sedately down the slope and Wade Jernigan, blue eyes squinted against the sun, looked ahead and to the right and to left. Somewhere ahead lay the little town of San Tomas, a railroad and a stockyards. Immediately ahead lay the broken, twisted country the Mexicans called *Barrancoso*, the rough country. The trail broke over a last rim, twisted like a snake with a broken

back, and dipped away. A windmill clanked a message of water and Percival cocked his ears forward and broke into an easy running walk. Somewhere ahead there was water and a stopping place, and Percival sensed the fact.

The scent of cedar smoke came faintly to Wade Jernigan's nostrils, and then through the cottonwoods below him a house came into view, long and low, the roof punctuated by chimneys from five fireplaces. The trail swung again and Jernigan found himself riding Percival through an open gate and into a ranch yard. There were four wagons in the yard, and beside a corral a man was dismounting. Percival stopped with no word from his rider. A small man, wrinkled and hawk-faced, limped around the corner of the house and stood surveying the newcomers with yellow, calculating eyes.

"Get down, stranger," he said after a moment. "Rest your saddle."

Jernigan dismounted. "I'm Wade Jernigan," he announced. "I've just come down the hill."

Once more the small man inspected him, taking in details of dress and face as he surveyed Jernigan from the tip of his worn Stetson to the toes of his shop-made boots. His eyes lingered on the belted gun that hung familiarly against a lean hip.

"This here is the Hobble O," he declared finally. "I reckon we'd make even a brand inspector welcome if he could dance. There's water in the corral an' hay in the rack. You can turn loose if you want."

"There's a dance tonight?" Jernigan asked, making no move.

"A dance," agreed the yellow-eyed man. "An' yo're welcome—for the night, anyhow, Mr. Jernigan."

Returning from the corral where Percival, belly filled with water, munched hay at the rack, Jernigan reached the corner of the shed and stopped. There was a girl by the shed corner, the yellow-eyed man standing just behind her. Jernigan removed his hat, and the girl smiled with red lips and dark eyes.

"I'm Ruth Furlong, Mr. Jernigan," she said in a pleasant, friendly voice. "This is my foreman, Prine Allbe. I've come to invite you to the dance."

Momentarily Jernigan's face was almost handsome with the smile that crossed it. "Thank you," he answered. "I've put my saddle in the shed. I'll not put you to extra trouble?"

Ruth Furlong laughed. "The whole country's coming," she said. "One more man won't be noticed. Uncle Prine will show you where to clean up and where you can sleep." She turned then, moving toward the house, smiling back across her shoulder. Prine Allbe came to Jernigan's side.

"You can wash an' sleep at the bunkhouse," he said shortly. "It's over here."

Jernigan followed the man across the yard. When they stopped beside the bunkhouse door Allbe gestured toward wash bench and water barrel.

"Supper's nigh ready," he said. "Stock inspector, ain't you?"

Jernigan poured water from the dipper into the washpan and laid aside his hat. "I work for the sanitary board," he agreed, rolling up his sleeves.

Prine Allbe grunted. "Sanitary board," he said sourly. "We been expectin' you."

Jernigan soaped his face and neck, his hands scratching against his beard stubble.

"The Barrancoso is tough on stock inspectors," Allbe volunteered.

"I've heard." Wade had finished his rinsing and was groping for the roller towel. He thrust his face into it and rubbed.

"You've got a reputation," Allbe remarked. "Mebbe you've earned it." Jernigan released the towel. Prine Allbe was halfway across the yard.

While he waited for supper, Jernigan lounged beside the house, his shoulder pressed against the logs. The Barrancoso had heard of him, and that meant that there was a leak in the sanitary board. Through that leak his name and destination had gone out. Wade Jernigan, the toughest inspector the board employed, was coming down to the Barrancoso. "What kind of a danged fool will you be?" old Roy Hardy had said. Jernigan rolled a cigarette and wondered.

Lounging there, he waited until he saw Prine Allbe coming toward him.

"Supper's ready," Allbe said.

Jernigan followed the yellow-eyed foreman toward two long tables where the food was spread, and joined the Hobble O guests as they filed past, loading their plates. Men and women, children, all ages and sizes, were in the Hobble O yard.

"There's some folks you ought to know," Allbe drawled. "Come over here."

Jernigan followed Allbe again. Beside a little group of booted men they stopped. Allbe drawled introductions and Wade Jernigan shook hands with a tall, broad-shouldered man, Sam Hofarth; with a thin, dark-haired fellow, Clyde Coons; with a youngster who grinned pleasantly, George Quaid; and with another, older man whose hair was gray at the temples and whose long face was narrow and impassive, Charles Sexton. Mentally Jernigan placed them as Allbe made the introductions. To Jernigan these men were brands, registered in the brand book he carried in his pocket. Hofarth was the Rafter H, Coons the Z Cross T; Quaid's brand was V Lazy Seven, and Charles Sexton headquartered his Hatchet brand at San Tomas.

"Our new brand inspector," Uncle Prine Allbe explained, malice in his voice. "He rode in in time for the dance."

Sexton nodded gravely, and Coons, nervous and abrupt, turned back to Jernigan and eyed him again. "You came in today?" he asked.

Jernigan nodded.

"And when will you be ready to work?"

"Tomorrow," Jernigan answered.

Coons looked at George Quaid. "Quaid's been acting deputy inspector since Gregory was killed," he said doubtfully. "But—"

"I'll appoint a deputy if I need one," Jernigan said smoothly. "Did you have some cattle to ship, Mr. Coons?"

"I've got some dry cows," Coons answered. "I'm shipping from San Tomas day after tomorrow."

"I'll be there," Jernigan promised.

Later, when the women were washing dishes and when other arrivals had augmented the crowd in the yard, Jernigan sat on the porch steps, smoking. Lamps glowed inside the Hobble O headquarters and the voices of the gathering made an even murmur through the twilight. Men, passing Jernigan,

nodded to him and made their brief inspections. Jernigan took it all in, a faint glint of amusement in his eyes.

II.

The dance began at nine. Watching from the doorway, Jernigan judged that the Hobble O must have a reputation for its dances. There was a big room, packed with guests. A fiddler, flanked by an accordion player and a man with a guitar, occupied a dais opposite the door. The fiddler was a small man, wrinkled with years and his beady eyes were bright as he sawed his bow and called the changes. With tapping foot he set the rhythm, calling, "Trail, oh, trail, old Indian style! Stop an' swing 'em once in a while!"

George Quaid, dancing with Ruth Furlong, caught Jernigan's eyes and nodded. "Better get in, Jernigan," he called as he passed.

The dance halted with the final change. Chatter, laughter, intermingling voices came from the dance floor as the fiddler tuned his violin. A voice at Jernigan's elbow drawled, "Yo're too prepared, my friend."

Jernigan turned. The man beside him had opaque eyes that were almost white. A star winked on his vest above a prominent paunch. "Prepared?" Jernigan queried.

"The hawgleg," the man with the opaque eyes drawled. "Guns ain't considered etiquette at a dance."

Jernigan smiled. "Where could I check it?" he asked.

"Down here," the man with the star answered, and led the way along the porch.

In the little room that opened off the end of the porch Jernigan added his weapon to others that lay upon a bed. Sam Hofarth was in the room, a bottle in his hand. When Jernigan put down his gun the Rafter H man offered the bottle.

"Drink?" he invited.

"I don't use it," Jernigan said. "Thanks."

"How about you, Mack?"

The star wearer also shook his head. "You might introduce yore friend," he drawled.

"I thought you knew each other," apologized Hofarth. "Jernigan, this is Mack Traveler, our deputy down this way. Mack, this is Mr. Jernigan, the new stock inspector."

Traveler's hand was limp as Jernigan shook it. "Glad to know you," the deputy said.

"Come on back to the dance," Hofarth commanded. "You fellows better take a drink."

Again Jernigan and Traveler refused, and Hofarth, stuffing the bottle down under a pillow on the bed, led the way back along the porch once more.

Back in the doorway, Jernigan watched the dancers. The musicians were playing a polka, and as Jernigan watched, a girl, blond, sparkling, broke away from Clyde Coons near the center of the room and made for the door. She halted there, breathless, bosom rising and falling swiftly, and looked up at Jernigan, her dark eyes glinting.

"Dance with me," she commanded.

Wordless, Jernigan stepped out from the door. He took his position facing the girl, held one slim hand, placed his arm about her slender waist. The music beat strongly and they were dancing, the girl light in his arms. Coons, at the wall now, scowled as they passed.

"He thinks he owns me," the girl said with a toss of her blond head.

"A desirable property," Jernigan drawled, looking down at her.

"You think so?" Dark eyes flashed a demure look.

"I'm sure of it," Jernigan murmured.

"What's your name?" the girl asked.

"Wade Jernigan," was the reply. "And you?"

"I'm Beauty Sexton." The girl turned expertly. "I—" The music stopped. "Come on," Beauty ordered. "Come on." She led him toward a group of laughing young people.

The dance swept Jernigan up, engulfed him. He danced with a dark-haired girl; with another, blond and buxom. A quadrille ended and he sought the doorway. Standing there outside the door, the breeze cooling him, he watched the crowd. Clyde Coons halted beside him, hesitated and then spoke brusquely. "Let Beauty alone!"

Jernigan turned. Coons was scowling. There was liquor on his breath, liquor in his truculence.

"And why?" Jernigan drawled.

"Because she's my girl. Because I tell you to!"

There was another man beside Coons now. Sam Hofarth. The rancher's hand settled on Coon's arm. "Come on, Clyde," he urged. "Come on!"

"Not before I tell this—" Coons rasped.

Hofarth dragged him away, Coons struggling futilely. Wade Jernigan watched them go into the little room at the end of the porch. He shrugged. Up on his platform the fiddler called: "Get your pardners for a quadrille!" Jernigan stepped into the door.

Beauty Sexton, her eyes seeking along the wall, spied him there, and she came hurrying. "You're my partner for this dance," she announced smilingly.

"And Clyde?" asked Jernigan.

The girl's face darkened fleetingly and then was bright again. "*You're* my partner," she said again. Jernigan allowed himself to be led from the doorway.

Ruth Furlong was in the set that formed. When the music began, Jernigan found himself and Beauty paired with Ruth and her partner.

"Are you having a good time?" Ruth asked. Jernigan started to answer, but his words were lost in the music.

"Bow to yore pardner!" the fiddler called.

Jernigan, automatically responding to the calls, watched Ruth Furlong. The girl was graceful. She had not the sparkling prettiness of Beauty Sexton, but her loveliness was deeper. Ruth Furlong's hair was black and her eyes were a midnight blue. She laughed as her hand touched Jernigan's, and her teeth were white and even beneath the red borders of her lips. The sets formed ranks, an aisle between the men and the women. The fiddler called: "Tall stranger take yore gal, swing her with the fiddle. Grab her waist an' promenade straight down the middle."

Jernigan, his arm about Beauty's waist, boots tapping to the rhythm, swung his partner and began his promenade. The fiddler's voice was high and shrill.

"Swing her wide an' don't you care, swing her till— *Duck, stranger!*"

With a heave of his arm Jernigan threw Beauty toward her father at the end of the line. With the motion he went down, throwing himself to the floor. From the dorway a shot crashed. At the far end of the room a woman screamed, and then from the door another shot smashed out. Holding his violin, the fiddler reeled on his chair and lurched forward.

Scrambling to his feet, Jernigan forced his way through the women and men who blocked his passage. He reached the door. Sam Hofarth was beside the door and just beyond, on the porch, his face lighted by the lamplight that came streaming through, was Mack Traveler.

"Keep 'em inside, Sam," Traveler ordered. "Keep 'em— Oh, it's you, Jernigan. Let him through, Sam, but keep the others inside."

Hofarth barred the doorway with a heavy arm. Ducking under the arm, Jernigan reached the porch. Behind him voices made a babble of mad sound.

"It was you he tried for, wasn't it?" Traveler said quietly.

"Yes," Jernigan said simply. "Did you see who it was?"

Traveler answered, "No," and led the way along the porch toward the little room where the guns had been left. They entered the room together. The weapons were still on the bed. Jernigan, picking up his own belt and holster, held it a moment and then, catching the sharp odor of burned powder, looked at Traveler.

"It was my own gun he used," Jernigan said quietly. Traveler's eyes were inscrutable. From the door, Prine Allbe said, "Ben Rainbo is shot, Mack. Bad hurt. He's dyin'."

"Damn it!" Traveler's curse was a murmur. "Rainbo saw who it was."

"We can go back," Jernigan said quietly. "He won't try again soon."

There was a sound of running feet and George Quaid pounded around the corner of the porch and slid to a stop. His breath came short and he gasped: "They left the corral. There was two of 'em. They rode south."

Traveler swore again, the curse an expressionless monotone, and Jernigan said: "Thank you, my friend."

Traveler walked rapidly toward the door, where Hofarth still kept guard. Jernigan looked at Quaid, scanning him searchingly and then drawled, "Thanks," again, and followed after the deputy. At the door Hofarth said to Traveler, "There's not more than half a dozen out of here. They were all

dancing." He lowered his arm so that the officer could enter. The chatter in the dance hall died when the men entered, and then rose again as they crossed the room.

Prine Allbe was at the door and silently stood aside for Traveler and Jernigan. There were five people in the room, and Jernigan, advancing to the bed, stopped and looked down at Ben Rainbo. The man's eyes were brilliant points in an ashen face from which all color had drained, and his breath came in great labored gasps.

"How is he, doctor?" Traveler asked a gray-haired man beside the bed.

The physician shook his head. "He was hit in the neck," he answered. "He can't talk. I don't think he'll live, Mack. I checked the blood, but—" His voice died away.

Wade Jernigan was watching the man on the bed, and Ruth Furlong, kneeling there.

"Ben . . . Ben," the girl pleaded. Ben Rainbo's bright eyes left Jernigan's face, searching about the room. "He wants somethin'," Jernigan said, and was surprised at the sound of his voice. "What is it he wants?"

Ruth looked up at the tall man, shaking her head. Rainbo's eyes were fixed now, and, following their gaze, Jernigan saw the accordion player standing beside the door. As though drawn forward by the look, the man with the accordion advanced and stopped beside the bed. Rainbo's left hand made a little gesture and his fingers moved on the coverlet.

"What is it he wants?" Jernigan said again. "What can he have, doctor? What—"

The fingers were moving on the coverlet. Ruth Furlong looked up, her eyes bright with the tears behind them. "He's playing his violin," she said. "He wants you to play, Yancy."

The man with the accordion swung it awkwardly. "I don't know no tunes that are right," he complained. "Ben's dyin' an' he's the one that always said what to play. What'll I play, Miss Ruth?"

The accordion was half extended now, Yancy's stubby fingers resting on the keyboard. "Play the 'Red River Valley,'" the girl instructed. "He liked that. Play—"

Jernigan, his eyes on Ben Rainbo's hand, spoke sharply. The hand had made a little negative gesture. "He don't want that," Jernigan said.

"Then what'll I play?" Yancy demanded again. "I can't—"

"Play," Jernigan ordered tersely. "Start playin' something."

The accordion wheezed. Uncertainly a tune began. Again the dying man's left hand gestured. "Not that," Jernigan ordered. "Somethin' else."

The tune from the accordion was a broken thing, dropped in midair. Yancy fingered the boards noiselessly. Then again sounds came from the instrument.

"He liked this," Yancy said. "He figgered it out himself."

Jernigan watched intently. The man on the bed made no movement. His eyes were bright and fixed on Jernigan's face. Jernigan, watching, catching the question in those searching eyes, shook his head helplessly. What was it Ben Rainbo wanted? What was it? Jernigan did not know. The accordion went on and on, endlessly, repeating the phrases of the song. It was a ballad, slow, plaintive, the native music of the West, born of the lonely cow camps, of the long trails, of the streams that made oases in the barren waste, of the cottonwoods and the sibilant little winds and the creak of saddle leather. In Ben Rainbo's eyes the light died away, dimming as though someone carried a lamp from the room. The accordion stopped and there was no sound.

"He's gone," the doctor said gravely, and, moving forward, picked up a limp hand, held the wrist a moment and then placed hand and arm across Rainbo's chest. Her head pillowed on the bedding, Ruth Furlong drew a long breath and then let it go in a sob that shook her slim shoulders.

Jernigan felt a hand on his arm and turning, looked at Mack Traveler.

"We can't do any good here," Traveler said curtly. "We'd better get out after those fellows that ran."

Jernigan shook his head. "We wouldn't find them," he drawled. "I've come a far piece today. I'll stay here."

"But they tried for you," Traveler said sharply. "It was you they wanted."

"They'll try again," Jernigan drawled. "They'll keep trying. You go if you want to, Traveler."

He turned his back on the officer and, bending, took Ruth Furlong's shoulders in his strong hands, lifting the girl. Yancy, the accordion player, had gone on out of the room, and the doctor was drawing the sheet over Ben Rainbo's face.

"You'd better come out now," Wade Jernigan said gently to the girl. "You'd better come along."

III.

With morning, Jernigan left the Hobble O. Mack Traveler had not yet returned. Leading his buckskin horse Jernigan walked toward the house. Ruth Furlong was on the porch bidding a group good-by. A restraint hung over the Hobble O, a heavy hand that silenced and quieted the people. Jernigan, pausing at the foot of the steps, waited

until the others had descended and gone on before he spoke.

"I'm sorry," he said to the girl above him. "I'm goin' on now."

Ruth Furlong's eyes were dark with pain. She searched Jernigan's face with a long look and did not speak.

"If I hadn't come," he said, "this wouldn't have happened. All I can say is I'm sorry. Good-by, Miss Ruth."

The girl spoke then. "I had known Ben Rainbo always," she said.

"And now he's dead and I was the cause," Jernigan said. "I blame myself for that. Ben Rainbo was a brave man."

"You're—going alone?" Ruth Furlong asked. "You aren't— Shouldn't someone go with you?"

Jernigan shook his head. "I'm better alone," he said, a tinge of bitterness in his voice. "And anyhow, I have Percival. I'll say again that I am sorry. Good-by, Miss Ruth."

He turned abruptly and, mounting, rode away. Ruth Furlong watched him going, tall and straight, through the yard gate. When he did not look back her eyes clouded, then she turned as others came to make their farewells. Jernigan and tall, yellow Percival were receding down the trail, a toy man on a toy horse that traveled steadily.

In a way, his ignorance of the country was an advantage to Wade Jernigan. He did not follow the trails and roads, but went through open country where he would be least expected, thus adding to his safety. Noon found him watering Percival at a windmill just at the end of a ridge.

Stretching in the shade of the tower, Jernigan considered the buckskin through slitted eyes. All morning as he rode he had been thinking, and now he reported his conclusions to the horse as though Percival were a human partner.

"Coons," Jernigan commented, "was outside an' I was dancing with his girl. He's a possibility. Hofarth was just at the door when I started out. He could have been out or in. Traveler was outside, and he made a play to show me how active he was. He couldn't find a thing last night an' he knew it. Did he play me for a fool, I reckon?" Jernigan shook his head and Percival brushed a fly from his belly with a big black hoof. "No," Jernigan said presently. "Traveler knows me. He's heard of me; he wouldn't play me for a fool. Or would he?" Percival shook himself until the stirrups popped.

"Then there's Quaid," Jernigan drawled softly. "He made a point of tellin' me where he was, Percival. What do you think of Quaid?" Percival, having rid himself of the flies, made no movement and Jernigan spoke again. "Excuse me, Percival. You weren't there, so you can't say. Anyhow, Quaid is right attentive to Ruth Furlong. We'll let Quaid go, at that. An' then, of course, there's Uncle Prine. We don't want to go overlookin' Uncle Prine. Uncle Prine would be suited if I was far away."

Percival flicked dark-tipped ears forward and Jernigan sat up. "It's a long time since the day before yesterday," he yawned, "and no rest for the wicked. Tonight you'll get a fed of grain an' a stall, an' I'll get a bed. Anyhow, it might have been somebody else. I just mentioned them fellers for your benefit."

Percival stamped, for the flies were back again, and Jernigan got up.

At sundown, Jernigan reached San Tomas. Percival was put into a stall at the livery barn where the hostler, impressed by the currency that Jernigan thrust into his hand, promised that the dun horse would receive every attention. Jernigan walked down the street, his saddlebags dangling, and entered the hotel. In the room he engaged, Jernigan removed the dust of travel and then went to the dining room to seek consolation for the inner man.

Sam Hofarth was in the dining room when Jernigan entered. Rising, the rancher called the tall brand inspector to him. Taking the seat that Hofarth indicated, Jernigan gave his order to the listless waitress.

"Have any trouble comin' in?" Hofarth asked when the waitress was gone.

Jernigan shook his head. "No trouble."

"They brought Ben Rainbo into town," Hofarth announced abruptly. "His funeral's tomorrow. Mack Traveler didn't find any sign of who done it."

"Not at night he wouldn't," Jernigan agreed.

"Or this mornin', either," Hofarth stated, and paused. "Clyde Coons was outside," he said significantly.

The waitress appeared, bearing food. Jernigan waited until she was gone before he spoke. "Coons is shippin' tomorrow," he observed. "Dry cows, he said."

"It's some we bought in Mexico," Hofarth agreed. "Coons and me went in together on 'em."

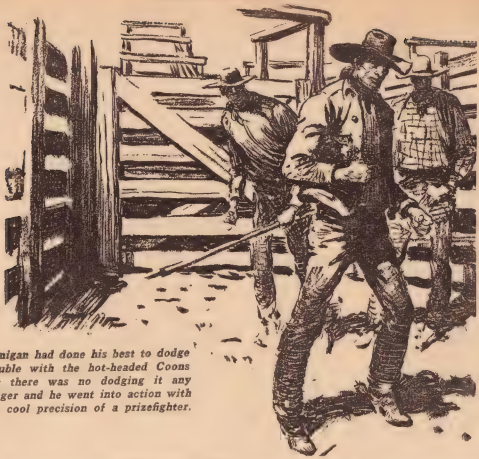
"What time will you want me at the yards?" asked Jernigan, spearing meat upon his fork.

"We've got an engine comin' at ten o'clock," Hofarth answered, and toyed with his coffee cup. He was finished with his meal, had been through when Jernigan came in.

"I'll be there early, then," Jernigan promised.

Hofarth got up. "I'll see you later?" There was a question in his voice.

"Not tonight," Jernigan answered. "I'm goin' to get some sleep tonight. I can use it."



Jernigan had done his best to dodge trouble with the hot-headed Coons but there was no dodging it any longer and he went into action with the cool precision of a prizefighter.

"I could use some sleep myself," Hofarth admitted, and left the dining room.

His supper finished, Jernigan went to his room and lighted a lamp. Above the washstand a picture of Robert E. Lee hung a trifle askew. Boots off and a cigarette fuming in his fingers, Jernigan lay on the bed. Presently he arose and straightened the picture.

"Excuse me, general, but you were a little cockeyed," he said apologetically, stepping back. "That's better, ain't it?"

Back on the bed again he took two puffs from the cigarette and, through the trailing smoke, stared at the picture. "They sure make a point of tellin' me about Clyde Coons," he observed.

Jernigan was up early the next morning. Reaching the stockyards, he noted that there were cattle in them and horses tied along the fence. The horses bore Rafter H brands. Sam Hofarth's horses, these were, and undoubtedly the men were Hofarth's riders.

The men clustered about Jernigan when he dismounted. There was Sam Hofarth, Clyde Coons with darkly smouldering eyes, and four cowboys. Jernigan sized the four riders up. They were a hard-bitten crew, tanned and seamy men. Jernigan noted the guns that were strapped on hips, a whiskey bottle or two that protruded from a pocket. He listened as Coons spoke briefly concerning the cattle, then looked over the bill of sale and the customs receipt that Coons gave him.

"Any time yo're ready," Jernigan drawled, and walked into the alleyway.

They were cutting in the alley, filling a pen at the lower end. Jernigan let the cows come down, three or four at a time, looked over their brands, nodded, and watched the gateman let them go into the empty pen. Perhaps forty head of cattle had gone by when he moved forward.

"There's a Hobble O," he announced. "Did you buy any Hobble O cows, Mr. Coons?"

Coons flushed. "I bought these in Mexico," he answered. "Everything here came across the line. I've got a bill of sale for every head that's here."

"And the Hobble O?" Jernigan persisted. "Do you claim her?"

He waited. Coons made no answer. Jernigan gestured to the man at the gate. "Cut her into that empty pen," he ordered.

The cowboy looked swiftly, not toward Coons, but to Hofarth. Jernigan noted the direction of the glance. Hofarth made no movement, and Coons said thickly, "Cut her with the rest of them, Jack."

"Then you do claim her?" drawled Jernigan.

"I said cut her with the bunch!" Coons snapped.

Jernigan shifted position so that his back was against the fence. His voice was smooth, yet it

carried force. "There's just one boss here today," he stated. "Yo're lookin' at him. Cut the Hobble O into the empty pen."

The cowboy moved across the alley and opened the gate. The cow went in and Jernigan spoke again as the gate was closed.

"Now we'll put the guns an' whiskey on the fence an' go on with our work," he drawled.

There was no movement after that announcement. Jernigan stood, thumb tucked into his belt above his Colt, watching the alleyway and the men in it. "On the fence," he said sharply. "You first, Jack!"

Jack, the cowboy working the lower end of the alley, moved sullenly, unbuckling his belt, and hanging it on a post. Jernigan watched while the others followed Jack's example. Coons was unarmed and Hofarth apparently had no weapon.

Unlatching his own belt, Jernigan hung it on a post. "Now we'll finish inspecting cattle," he announced, his voice bland and expressionless.

More cows came down the alleyway. Jernigan read the brands. Twice more he ordered a cow cut to the stray pen, in both instances calling the brand as a Hobble O.

When the alley was clear of cattle, Jernigan stepped back. "About the Hobble O cows," he drawled. "Do you claim them, Hofarth?"

Sam Hofarth looked at Coons. "You bought the cattle, Clyde," he reminded.

"I bought three hundred and twenty head and paid for them," Coons growled. "There's just three hundred and twenty in the yards."

"Counting the Hobble O's," Jernigan drawled. "I want to know do you claim them?"

"You think I stole them?" Coons flashed. "Let me tell you—"

"I ain't thinkin'," interrupted Jernigan. "I hold those Hobble O cattle for their owner. If you don't claim the Hobble O's you can load the rest an' I'll write out yore inspection certificate."

"Clyde," Hofarth said, "come here a minute."

The two men drew aside. After a brief talk, Hofarth came back to Jernigan. "We don't claim the Hobble O's," he said.

Wordlessly, Jernigan drew a book of inspection certificates from his pocket and, squatting by the fence, began to write. When he finished his

certificate and had given it to Hofarth, he walked to the end gate of the alley. A chain and lock hung there, provided by the railroad company for stockmen who were forced to leave cattle overnight in the yards. Jernigan brought the chain and lock back and fastened the gate of the pen that held the Hobble O cattle, snapping the lock shut. When he finished he started across the alley toward his gun belt.

Coons met him halfway across the alley. "You think I stole those Hobble O's," the young rancher said thickly. "Damn you! I'm no thief! You—" His anger choked him and he swung wildly at Jernigan's head.

Jernigan ducked. The blow knocked off his hat. Straightening, he saw Hofarth against the fence and the riders standing by.

"You will have it, won't you?" Jernigan said thinly, and stepped in toward Coons.

Coons was as big as Jernigan, and as strong, but he fought blindly, choked by his anger, maddened by it. Jernigan was cool. He checked Coons with a left hand that lashed out like the flicking of a buggy whip, boxed with a cold precision as though counter and movement were automatic. He did not mar Coons, save only once, when he struck his mouth. Coons straightened with that blow, and Jernigan, stepping in, crossed his right hand and shifted all his weight behind it. Coons went down to the dirt in the alleyway, and Jernigan, without a glance at the man he had felled, picked up his hat and moved toward the fence again.

He was buckling his belt about him when Coons sat up. Before the man could scramble to his feet, Jernigan, his back turned, was walking toward the gate at the alley's end.

Riding back toward town, he surveyed his knuckles ruefully. They were skinned and sore. Jernigan sucked them. "You can't depend on it," he murmured, taking the knuckles from his mouth. "Sometimes a fight settles things, but I think not this time."

IV.

In San Tomas, Jernigan left his horse at the livery barn and returned to his hotel. Dinner over, he strolled out on the street. There were people in town, motion and activity. He was a block from the hotel when he heard his name called, and turning, saw Beauty Sexton coming from a store. Her father was behind her. Jernigan waited for them to reach him.

Nothing had touched Beauty—not the long ride to town nor the sleepless night nor the tragedy at the Hobble O. She was bright and shining as a bit of metal, and Jernigan, watching her, could not but marvel at her light-hearted vivaciousness. Beauty could not talk to a man without smiling, without coquetry in her eyes, without reaching out and touching his arm. Her hand was on Jernigan's arm now.

"You're going to the funeral?" she asked. "Ruth has come in. She's at our house. You're going, Mr. Jernigan?"

"I'm going," Wade Jernigan said gravely.

"Will you come to the house?" Still Beauty's hand rested on his sleeve. "Ruth wants to talk to you. She asked me to tell you if I saw you."

"I'll come," he promised.

He went on then, after bidding Beauty and her father good-by. He walked on down the street, a tall, easy-moving man strolling under the awnings. Farther along the street was the red-and-white striped pole that marked the barber shop. Jernigan went toward it. Entering the shop, he saw Yancey, the accordion player, at work behind the chair. Jernigan pushed back his hat and sat down on the broad window ledge.

There was a checkerboard on the ledge and, idly, Jernigan arranged the men and began a game, playing right hand against left. Engrossed in the occupation, he did not note the departure of Yancy's customer, but continued to move, red against black, detaching his mind after each play so that in reality he was two persons, each playing to win. The barber's voice, rasping at his shoulder, made him start.

"The red can win in four moves," Yancy announced.

Jernigan studied the board, made room on the ledge and said: "Show me."

Yancy sat down. It was the red's move. Yancy shifted a man. After deliberate study, Jernigan took the jump offered, grunted and said, "You were right."

Yancy took a triple jump; Jernigan retreated with his remaining black king, and in two more moves he was cornered.

"You play checkers good," Yancy admitted grudgingly. "What is it you want? A shave?"

"A shave," Jernigan agreed, and climbed into the chair.

He lay there relaxed while Yancy shaved him. The razor made a rasping sound as the beard was cut away. Lifting the chair, Yancy shaved the back of Jernigan's neck, completed the application of talcum and removed the apron.

"What was the tune you played last night?" Jernigan asked casually.

There was silence for a moment, and then Yancy answered: "'The Cowboy's Delight.'"

"I see." Jernigan studied his reflection in the mirror. "Can you sing it?"

"I don't know the words." Yancy was apologetic. "Ben wrote the song. He made up the music. I've

got the words wrote down. They're around here some place."

"I'd like to hear them," Jernigan drawled.

Yancy turned the chair a trifle as though inviting its occupant to leave. "If you hadn't come to the Barrancoso, Ben would be alive," he said suddenly. "It's almost time for his funeral."

Jernigan stepped out of the chair. "That's true," he agreed. "And if he hadn't called out to me, I'd be dead. He was trying to tell us something last night. I wish I knew what it was."

"I'll miss Ben," Yancy said reflectively. "Him an' me punched cows together. We've always been together."

"A man misses a friend," Jernigan agreed. "I wish I knew the words for that song."

He paid Yancy and left the shop. Further along the street a group of people was forming. In front of the little white-painted frame church there was a wagon drawn up. It was time for the funeral. Jernigan moved toward the church, and Yancy, hurrying, stumping along, passed him by.

"I'm a pall bearer," Yancy explained, over his shoulder.

Jernigan entered the church with the others. He stayed well in the back, sliding into a rear pew. The preacher was a gaunt man, black-garbed and with a prominent Adam's apple. He kept his voice toned down with an obvious effort, and Jernigan surmised that he was a shouter, dealing on Sundays in hell fire and damnation, and that preaching a funeral sermon was a chore. The organ was out of repair and wheezed asthmatically. Neither the preacher nor the wheezing organ detracted from the simple impressiveness of the ceremony. The minister's voice was vibrant as he read from the scripture: "In my Father's house there are many mansions—" and "Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of sorrow—"

When the service was over, Jernigan filed out with the crowd. He waited until the wagon that bore the coffin drove away, and then started toward town. Some of the people from the church had gone with the wagon; others, like Jernigan, were walking. Jernigan turned the corner below the church and went up the street. Sexton's house was at the end of the little thoroughfare.

Going up the walk toward the house, Jernigan heard voices. The vines covered the porch and hid the speakers. Jernigan climbed the steps. Beauty Sexton was in the hammock at the end of the porch, Ruth Furlong beside her. Prine Allbe stood just beside the hammock. Jernigan took off his hat and bowed to the women. He spoke to Prine.

"There are four Hobble O cows in the yards," he said. "I cut them from a shipment this morning. The gate is locked and the agent has the key. You can get them any time."

"It was Coons shippin'?" questioned Prine Allbe without any inflection in his voice.

"It was Coons," Jernigan agreed. "The cattle are there for you to take."

Allbe grunted. "I'll go on to town then," he said, and walked down the steps. Jernigan turned to the girls in the hammock.

"You wanted to see me, Miss Ruth?" he asked.

Beauty got up from the hammock. "I'll get some lemonade," she said. "It's hot." She went through the door, and Ruth Furlong, lifting her eyes to meet Jernigan's, answered his question.

"I wanted to see you," she agreed. "I wanted to talk to you. Why did you come to the Barrancoso?"

"Because I was sent," Jernigan answered succintly. "I'm a stock inspector. I was assigned to this district."

The girl shook her head. "There's nothing but trouble in the Barrancoso," she mused, not looking at Jernigan. "Nothing but trouble. I wish—"

"Yes?" Jernigan prompted.

"I wish that you hadn't come," she said, looking at him.

"Ben Rainbo might be alive if I hadn't come," Jernigan said quietly. "But there would be another man here in my place. And the trouble would remain."

Ruth Furlong's eyes searched his face. "You're going to stay?" she asked.

"I'm going to stay," he agreed. "You thought a lot of Ben Rainbo, didn't you?"

"I had known him all my life." The statement was simple. "He was my friend."

Jernigan was silent for a moment. "Ben Rainbo," he announced at length, "tried to tell me something last night. He couldn't say it. What was the song he wanted, Miss Ruth."

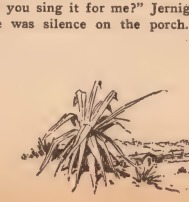
"A song he made up," the girl answered.

"And do you know it?" Jernigan's voice was edged and a little harsh.

Ruth's dark head nodded.

"Will you sing it for me?" Jernigan urged.

There was silence on the porch. Then Ruth



Furlong lifted her eyes, looked at Jernigan and studied him carefully. Apparently she must have been reassured by what she saw in his face, for, turning her head, she began to sing softly. Jernigan bent forward to catch the words.

"Sometimes when he's guardin' the cattle,
Sometimes by the campfire's light,
A cowpuncher takes to dreamin'
Of a girl that's the cowboy's delight.
She's tender an' lovin' an' trustful,
Her eyes an' her smile are bright;
The whole world around about loves her—
The girl that's the cowboy's delight."

The song checked. Jernigan shook his head. "There's more," he said. "Go on, please."

Ruth Furlong caught her breath with a little sob. "He—" she began, and then: "I can't sing it. I—"

"Ben Rainbo wanted to tell me something," Jernigan urged. "Will you sing it, Miss Ruth?"

Once more the girl caught her breath. Then again the faint murmur of melody began.

"The cowboy keeps thinkin' and dreamin'
Of a home by the river's side
With sycamores guardin' the doorway.
It's there that he longs to abide.
When the wild roses bloom by the doorstep
And the whippoorwill sings at night,
It's there that he'll carry his loved one—
The girl that's the cowboy's delight."

Ruth stopped singing. Inside the house, Beauty Sexton's steps pattered briskly as she moved back and forth. Wade Jernigan sat on the porch railing, absolutely still.

"That's . . . that's all," the girl said finally.

Jernigan shook his head. His smooth, thoughtful face bore a puzzled expression. "I don't *sabe*," he said. "I don't— Ben Rainbo had been all over this country, hadn't he? He'd never been out of this country much?"

"He had never left it."

Jernigan's eyes brightened. "He was describing a place he'd seen," he drawled. "A place— Where are there any sycamores in this country, Miss Ruth? Where are there any growing along the river?"

The girl's hand came up to her mouth and her eyes were wide with something like terror. "I—" she began. Then: "There aren't any sycamores. There aren't any. Why don't you leave this country? Why don't you go out of the Barrancoso? You needn't stay here. You—"

"You don't have to tell me," Jernigan said gently. "Somebody will know. Or if no one will tell me, I'll find the place myself. Will you ask Miss Beauty to excuse me, please?"

He straightened from the rail, bowed gravely to the girl in the hammock and went down the steps. With her hand pressed against her lips, Ruth Furlong watched him go.

Striding along, paying no heed to his surroundings, Jernigan reached the street corner below Sexton's house and stopped, half inclined to return to the Sextons. There were things he had to know, and Ruth Furlong could tell him. Jernigan shook his head. Others besides Ruth would know the things he wanted to learn. He stepped down from the board sidewalk and stopped again. Clyde Coons, his mouth puffed from Jernigan's blow, was coming across the street, a gun at his hip. Jernigan waited.

Coons came on, halted perhaps ten feet away. "Jernigan!" he said brusquely.

"Yes?" Jernigan's voice was even.

"You thought I stole those cattle," Coons rasped. "You whipped me out at the stockyards. Now, dammit, I'll kill you!"

"No," Jernigan said without raising his voice, "you haven't a chance, Coons. I knew what you wanted when you came across the street. I could have downed you then; I can down you now."

"Try it!" Coons flared. "Make a try at it!"

"An' be hanged for murder?" Jernigan drawled. "Not me. You go ahead. I won't stop you. Get yore shootin' done, Coons."

A puzzled expression came into the other's eyes. He hesitated. Jernigan took advantage of that indecision.

"You're sore at me," he said quietly. "You think I tried to cut you out with your girl. You think I rode you down at the stockyards. You've been primed to kill me, Coons."

"You—" Coons began.

"Get some sense!" Jernigan said curtly. "You were told I thought you were a thief. You jumped me at the yards and we fought. That was fair enough, wasn't it? Get some sense, Coons! Who told you to hunt me up? Who filled you up with liquor? Why do you think I was told repeatedly that you were outside last night? They want you an' me to have it out. That's what they want!"

"Who do you mean?" The indecision was plain in Coons' voice.

Jernigan relaxed. The danger was past. "You think about it an' you'll know who I mean," he said. "Go up to Beauty's an' think it over. Drink some lemonade an' kiss her an' ask her to forgive you. Whatever happened wasn't your fault, but ask her to forgive you just the same. An' don't step into this thing, Coons. Honest men stay out of trouble an' you're an honest man, even if you are a fool."

For a brief moment anger flickered again in Clyde Coons' eyes. Jernigan ignored it. Deliberately he moved ahead, walking past Coons, making his way across the street. He did not look back.

Back in his room at the hotel, Jernigan sat down in the rickety chair and placed his feet on the table. Lacking Percival as a confidant, he stared at the picture of Robert E. Lee. The steady eyes of the bearded man in the picture looked back at him. Jernigan shifted in the chair, produced papers and tobacco and rolled a thin cigarette. Lighting it, he blew smoke toward the ceiling and addressed the picture in an even drawl, his voice a murmur that did not carry above the buzzing of the flies that circled the room.

"My dad followed you a long way, general," Wade Jernigan drawled. "A long way. Clear to the finish. He was an admirer of yours. I wish you'd give me a little advice."

More smoke traveled ceilingward, and Jernigan moved his feet on the table top. "It's Hofarth, I'd judge," he murmured. "He was at the door, but so was Traveler, and Traveler's the dangerous one. They were both outside. One of them took the two shots. Then Hofarth barred the door and Traveler put the gun back on the bed. He had time for that. Quaid came running up to tell about the two men that sloped out. Maybe there was two men, but I don't think so. Prine Allbe was there to back the deal. That's the way it was. You see, general? An' it's Hofarth that has been primin' Coons for trouble."

The smoke eddying before the face of the picture gave an illusion of movement for an instant, and Jernigan nodded. "I'm glad you understand," he said. "Now here: Of course these fellows deal in Mexico cattle. A brand inspector cramps their style. They bring a little bunch across the border and pay the duty, but before they ship they add a bigger bunch that haven't paid duty. Strays and cattle that have been stolen, anything goes into the cars. That is, as long as there isn't any inspection. It's a right lucrative business, and they'd hate to have it broken up. Likely Prine Allbe is in it, too. Anyhow he knows about it and makes some money from it. You see how it is?"

He smoked quietly for a while, digesting the things he had said aloud. Then he dropped his cigarette butt to the floor and ground it into the boards as he arose.

"And Ben Rainbo told me where Hofarth lives, and that it was Hofarth at the door last night," he said slowly. "When they were pushing you, general, you marched into Pennsylvania and attacked. Of course, you got beat, but that wasn't your fault. I reckon you knew what you were doing, and so do I."

Across the patio, through the open door came the clang of the gong, summoning the guests of the hotel to supper. Wade Jernigan crossed to the washstand and began to wash his hands. He had made up his mind what he was going to do.

V.

After the evening meal, Jernigan went out on the street. There was still light, the soft, after-sunset haze of Indian-summer dusk. A block away along the street a man sat on the bench in front of the barber shop. It was Yancy, Jernigan noted, and the barber was looking at a paper.

Across the street from the hotel light came over and under the half doors of the Acme Saloon, and a pleasant murmur of voices and clinking of glasses accompanied the light. Jernigan strode along the street to the barber-shop bench and stood looking down at Yancy.

"It don't seem like the words fit the tune too good," Yancy said without looking up from the sheet of paper he held. "An' it looks like he'd have put more verses to it."

"Yes," Jernigan drawled, "but there were enough verses, Yancy. That part about the sycamores is mighty nice, now."

"Old Allbe place," exclaimed Yancy. "Ben an' me worked there once. Ben snapped broncs for old Jake Allbe when he was a kid. But Prine got into trouble, an' his dad had to let the place go. Sam Hofarth's got it now. Ben planted roses all around the house. He dug up a lot of wild rose bushes an'—Say! You know—"

Jernigan waited. Yancy said nothing more but stared blankly across the street. After a moment Jernigan cleared his throat. "Ben Rainbo was trying to tell us about that," he drawled. "He couldn't talk, you know, and the best he could do would be to describe a place. Isn't that right?"

Yancy dropped the paper he held and looked up at Jernigan. "But Sam Hofarth!" he expostulated. "Why, Sam is—"

"A respected citizen," Jernigan completed. "Still it might be worth while telling Mack Traveler about what you think, Yancy. You could tell Traveler that I'll be down in the Acme if he wants to talk to me. He's the law, you know."

"Sam Hofarth!" Yancy said again, wonderment in his tone. "I can't hardly believe it. You're crazy, Jernigan."

"Maybe," Jernigan drawled. "But you tell Traveler, anyhow." He turned and walked back toward the Acme, feeling Yancy's eyes staring after him.

Men nodded to Jernigan as he entered the saloon. He returned their greetings, walked back and seated himself at a table. Gathering up the cards that lay on the felt-covered top and, bunching them, he shuffled. To the bartender's inquiry as to his wants, he answered, "Beer," and began to lay out a solitaire game. The men along the bar, Jernigan's advent forgotten, resumed their conversation. Jernigan went through the deck, putting red card

on black, black card on red. The collar of foam on the beer dissipated gradually until no more remained and Jernigan shuffled the deck again. As he began once more to place the cards, the doors opened and George Quaid came in. Carefully, Jernigan finished the layout and slipped the top three from the cards that remained in his hand.

Quaid stayed at the front of the bar. Again the doors opened and closed as Prine Allbe entered. Jernigan put the ace of hearts above the layout, placed the deuce on top of the ace, and turned up a card. Allbe and Quaid stood talking in low voices. Once more the doors opened, this time to admit Sam Hofarth and, almost on Hofarth's heels, came Mack Traveler.

The lines tightened around Wade Jernigan's mouth. Yancy had gone to Traveler and now the cohorts were gathering. Hofarth and Traveler joined Quaid. The bartender came along behind the polished walnut and asked for their orders. Traveler spoke to the bartender who, listening a moment, jerked his head toward the card table, the motion almost imperceptible. Jernigan lifted the glass of beer in his left hand and sipped it. Breaking away from his companions, Traveler came briskly back along the bar and stopped on the farther side of the card table. Jernigan put the glass back on the felt.

"Hot tonight," he drawled.

"Kind of hot," Traveler agreed. "Say—Yancy came to me with some sort of wild idea that you'd cooked up. He said that Ben Rainbo had told you who shot him."

Jernigan nodded, his eyes not leaving Traveler's face. Behind Traveler, Hofarth and the other two had moved. Allbe remained by the door, Quaid moved aimlessly into a position against the wall while Hofarth came along the bar until he was just at Traveler's left and a little back of him.

"He did," Jernigan said. "Not a name exactly, but a place. He described it in a song."

Traveler's laugh was gruff. "You're crazy," he said. "Just because an old fiddler wanted a song played when he passed out, you think it's got some meaning. I told Yancy to go on about his business and I came down here to tell you the same thing. I'll handle the law in this end of the county, Jernigan. I don't need a stock inspector to tell me what to do. I know where I stand."

Jernigan placed an uncovered king in position, laid the deck aside and looked steadily at the officer. "I know where you stand, too," he drawled. "I'm a stock inspector, Traveler, but I've been carrying a commission in the Mounted Police for the last two years. As for where you stand, it's where you always stood—just where you stood when you carried my gun back after it had been used. Keep your hands still, Traveler. You're an accessory to murder and I'm going to take you in!"

Again the door of the Acme opened and closed. Jernigan sensed that, rather than saw it. He was watching Mack Traveler, his eyes unmoving and yet completely conscious of Hofarth, who stood behind the deputy. Traveler was stock still, carved from stone to all appearances and yet ready, so Jernigan sensed, to break into smooth flowing life and action. The bartender had disappeared behind the bar. The other men in the saloon were quiet, hushed, tense and ready to move.

"So," Traveler said very softly, "you'll take me in?"

He moved then, swinging to the right, shifting toward Hofarth. As he moved, his hand dipped back and down. Jernigan, still seated, moved his own hand in a flowing half-arc of motion and instantly explosions violated the quiet of the room, rapping it with roaring sound.

With that first shot, Jernigan thrust the table from him, sending it toward Traveler and Hofarth. The table jerked and settled back on its legs, a rent appearing in the green felt. Mack Traveler, reeling back from the shock of the slug that had struck him, tripped against Hofarth and staggered. Jernigan, the gun hot in his hand, started up out of his chair. Traveler was down now and Hofarth was crouched against the end of the bar, his eyes bleared with pain, the sharp features of his face smeared with the agony that was in him, his weapon fallen at his feet. So Jernigan saw them and realizing that they were done, he swung sharply to meet the menace of George Quaid and Prine Allbe, only to find that there was no menace. Quaid stood against the wall, his hands half lifted. Confronting him was Clyde Coons, a gun in his hand and his body bent forward a little, as though that might add to the menace of the weapon. Beside the door Yancy, the barber, held a double-barreled shotgun awkwardly to his shoulder. With the muzzles of the shotgun almost touching his chest, Prine Allbe shrank as far back against the bar as possible, making himself small and standing very still.

From behind the bar, the bartender's glossy

head rose slowly into sight. Clyde Coons, his voice sounding thin after the roar of the gunshots, said, "We came down to take a hand, Jernigan. Yancy and me. You said that I was honest, remember?"

"Yes," Jernigan agreed, "I remember."

Later when telegrams had been sent to the Adjutant General of the State, the commanding officer of the Mounted Police, and to the sheriff of the county, when Prine Allbe and George Quaid had been lodged in the single cell at San Tomas' little jail, and the bodies of Mack Traveler and Sam Hofarth had been decently laid out in the warehouse of Stern's store and the time for the inquest had been set, Wade Jernigan, Clyde Coons, Yancy and Charles Sexton, stood in the lobby of the hotel and looked at one another. They were filled with thoughts, those four, and with the dregs of the activity that had preceded this quiet moment.

Yancy's shotgun still lay decoratively across his arm and there was still a glint of excitement in Coons' eyes. As for Sexton, he had been summoned from his house by an urgent message, and he had heard the denouement if not the climax of the drama. It was Sexton who spoke.

"I knew," he said slowly, "that there were shipments of smuggled cattle. Of course I knew that. I believe everyone knew it. I wrote to Roy Hardy and asked for another man in the Barrancoso. We had had bad luck with our inspectors and we needed a good man. I asked Roy for the best he had. Jernigan, somehow, I can't believe that Prine Allbe was in it very deeply."

"Not very deep, Mr. Sexton," Jernigan replied. "He stole a few cattle from his own outfit and he dealt in Mexican cattle like the rest, but he wasn't in very deep. He'll turn State's evidence and get off light."

There was silence for a moment and Clyde Coons stirred restlessly. "Sam played me for a fool," he said. "I—" he hesitated.

"You came in very pat," Jernigan interrupted. "You and Yancy. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

Yancy coughed deprecatingly. "I got thinkin'," he said for the third or fourth time, "I got to thinkin' about Old Ben Rainbo an' about that song, an' I just went an' got Clyde an' we went down there."

"And I appreciate it," Jernigan assured him.

Sexton swung away from his companions, took several steps across the lobby, come back and stood looking at Jernigan. "There's nothing more to do until the sheriff comes," he announced. "You know who killed Ben Rainbo. You know that Traveler shot Neil Gregory and that it was Hofarth that took the shot at you and who shot Ben. You know who was stealing cattle and shipping them. There's nothing more to do until morning."

"Nothing until morning," Jernigan agreed.

"Then I'm going home," Sexton said. "Are you coming, Clyde?"

Clyde Coons looked at Sexton and then turned back to Jernigan. There was a glint of boyish amusement in Coons' eyes. A smile twitched at his puffed lips. Over across the street the swamper of the Acme had covered blood with sawdust and the sharp smell of powder smoke still clung to Wade Jernigan's clothing. Tragedy had walked in the Acme and these men had been actors in that play, and yet Clyde Coons was stifling an amusement, hiding some rising humor in his eyes.

"I'll come in a minute," Coons answered Sexton.

Sexton walked to the door and Coons spoke softly to Jernigan. "Are you coming?"

Jernigan shook his head. "There's no one—" he began and then, swiftly changing the sentence: "There is no need for me to go."

That twinkle grew in Coons' eyes. "You gave me some good advice this afternoon," Coons said. "I thought that you knew something about women, Jernigan."

"I know very little," Jernigan answered. "I—What the devil do you mean, Coons?"

"I mean," Clyde Coons drawled, "that Ruth Furlong heard the shots and that she sent Sexton to the Acme. She wanted to know, Jernigan, so she sent him."

With that he walked to the door, joining the impatient Sexton on the sidewalk. Yancy was at the desk talking to the bald-headed hotel owner and Jernigan stood alone in the center of the lobby. Ruth Furlong had wanted to know and she had sent Charles Sexton to the Acme. Ruth Furlong—

"Are you coming, Jernigan?" Coons called from the sidewalk.

"Coming," answered Jernigan.

THE END.

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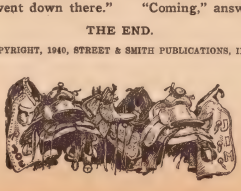

DEATH MARKS TIME IN TRAMPAS

When Jimmy Christmas filled a hand for Cupid he figured he'd need smoke-poles instead of arrows to round up Mike Greer's tough hands

by T. T. Flynn

I.

If Jimmy Christmas had not learned early that a wary life is a long life, the day's ride would have ended differently. If Jimmy Christmas had been as harmless as the look of his blue eyes, his quick smile and his slender build, the roan horse he was riding would have bolted toward Trampas with an empty saddle.

Stetson cocked jauntily, whistle careless against the rocks and cactus in the long crooked draw, Jimmy Christmas rode toward Trampas as if he had not a care in the world. And the bearded stranger who rose suddenly among the trailside rocks with a triggered rifle had him cold.

The whistle was still echoing, the bearded man still a rising blur of movement, yelling: "Put 'em up!" when Jimmy Christmas went out of the saddle like a vanishing phantom. One instant he was there whistling—and then as the rifle cracked, he was down behind the horse.

The cold touch of the bullet kissed Jimmy's left arm near the shoulder, stinging it with pain, but not crippling it. Jimmy landed feet down behind the horse, caught his balance with smoothly whipping muscles, and in the same movement drew his

hand gun. The saddle boot held a rifle, but the stranger was near enough for the short gun. A slap sent the roan trotting on, while Jimmy Christmas dived back across the trail with the triggered gun roaring.

A second fast shot from the rifle challenged this reckless attack. The bullet missed, and after that it was too late.

Jimmy's crashing gun knocked the stranger back, drove him spinning to the ground. He was twitching, gasping, when Jimmy Christmas bent over him. Three out of four bullets had smashed into the thick-chested body. Jimmy Christmas took one quick look at him, caught up the rifle and swung around in a quick survey of the draw.

He was soon reassured. The air still seemed to quiver with the blasting gun reports. The raw powder smell crawled into the nostrils like something alive and biting. But that was all.

Foot by foot, Jimmy Christmas took in the rocks and stunted bushes on both sides of the draw and along the trail. He was alone. And the man he had fought with was not a stranger.

Last night in a saloon at Cold Spring this man had lounged at the bar while Jimmy had asked about the short cut to Trampas and the kind of town a man would find.

"Never been there, young feller?" this stranger had asked.

Jimmy had grinned, shaken his head. "I've heard that the best cook this side of the Panhandle lives there," he said.

"Gal by the name of Gates?"

"That her name?"

The man had showed his teeth in a smile. "You musta been talking to a friend of the lady's."

"One meal'll tell me."

That had been last night in Cold Spring, after a long day's ride. Jimmy Christmas, saddle-stiff, tired, ready for sleep, had not thought much of the encounter. A bearded stranger and a lady named Sue Gates had been matters for another day.

Matter for today, for now, with the sun bright brass above and the powder smell strong over the blood of a dying man.

Jimmy leaned over him. "Stranger, we never met before last night and everything was friendly then. How come?"

The man was dying with his eyes open, blood bubbling on his lips, breath whistling, pumping through his throat. He swallowed, gulped, gasped, answered in a thick, metallic voice.

"Lucky enough to get me! Hell won't hold me while I'm watchin' yuh get it, too . . . yuh damned pink-cheeked lucky young fool!"

Which was wrong. The face of Jimmy Christmas was young and smooth. The eyes, the smile, the way of Jimmy Christmas to the world, might have gone with pink cheeks. But the luck had been the luck of Jimmy Christmas, which was not luck at all.

"So you'll be watchin' me get it," Jimmy said thoughtfully. "How come you're so sure I'll get it?"

But now the man was past talking. Life was draining away, leaving a dull, opaque emptiness in the man's eyes.

Jimmy Christmas leaned on the rifle and looked down regretfully. He could do nothing. Already the man was slipping past thought of feeling. He'd made his play and lost. He was dying without leaving a reason for all this.

Amazingly, life flickered back into the dulling eyes. A smile split the bloody bearded mouth. Then death was suddenly there. The smile faded; the eyes were empty and vacant as Jimmy Christmas drew a long breath and turned away, wondering.

The stranger had died laughing at him! And that was something to carry along the trail and ponder!

The roan horse had stopped up the draw a short distance and was staring with ears cocked at the righthand slope. Reloading the hand gun, Jimmy moved warily up the slope. Blood was wet on his upper arm. The coat sleeve was ripped where the bullet had cut through. The smart and bite of the wound was crawling into the shoulder. But that could wait.

The roan nickered. An answering nicker came from behind the crest of the slope. Jimmy relaxed, and beyond the slope top found a sorrel horse tied in cedar brush out of sight of the trail.

Foam flecks showed that the horse had been ridden fast. A slicker was tied behind the saddle. Saddlebags held extra cartridges and a pint of whiskey. There was nothing else to give a clue to the stranger's identity.

Jimmy looped the reins on the saddlehorn and sent the horse trotting back into the brush. The animal would find his way home. His rider would do well enough there among the ambush rocks.

Bury the man, hide traces of the fight, and the world would cry murder. Tie him on his horse and pack him to a sheriff and the unreasoning red tape of the law would take hold.

Questions would be asked. He himself might be locked up while the matter was investigated. Jimmy smiled thinly as he walked back down the slope. If the law wanted to take hold, let the law find the dead man, find who killed him, catch the man and lock him up.

On the trail Jimmy stripped off coat and shirt, slopped canteen water over the arm wound, tied a

bandanna around it. Then he mounted and rode on.

This short-cut trail to Trampas was little used. Up and over the mountain spurs the trail drove, and down through miles of bone-dry cactus and greasewood-studded badlands before it dipped without warning into a narrow little river valley.

There in the valley Trampas hugged the bank of the Antelope River, where the shallow current crawled lazily between yellow sandbars, and cottonwoods marked the rutted dusty road that ran from the border country to the higher country on north.

Beyond the low houses of Trampas, beyond the river channel, were buttes and low hills thrusting from a great vast sweep of grazing land. Short grass and stunted trees, cactus, bear grass and struggling weeds, that was the Trampas range. Water here and there. Dykes and ridges, buttes and little hills gave strength and sinew to the hazy distance. And everywhere the grass, the short grass on which cattle thrived in wet years and dry years.

Under the late-afternoon sun the Trampas range lay empty, dead. But there were cattle in a thousand draws and hollows, cattle like flyspecks on the flats. And here and there behind sheltering slopes were ranchhouses, corrals, windmills. And faint, spidery lines marked ranch roads crawling sinuously across the range toward the Trampas road where the freight wagons and lumbering stagecoaches came and went in yellow clouds of dust.

Only a little of that could Jimmy Christmas see as he rode down toward the river; but he knew it was all there. And then he was in Trampas, where the high road formed the main street and the huddled adobe houses turned their backs to the river.

He headed first for the livery stable, and found it a cavernous adobe building. The hostler was a grinning young Mexican.

"Rub him down an' feed him good. Fresh straw in a clean stall," Jimmy directed, and stretched stiffly, suppressing a wince at the soreness which had settled in his arm.

"*Si, señor.*"

"Guess I won't lug the rifle around," Jimmy decided. "Keep it here?"

"*Si, señor,*" the Mexican repeated.

"How's the hotel?" Jimmy asked and had to wait for his answer.

Running horses drummed through the road dust outside, coming to a halt at the livery stable doorway. Men flung from the saddles calling to one another, laughing, spur chains jangling as they stamped about. Six men. A shout came from one of them.

"Where's that damned Mex? Hey, you! Get these horses before you get told worse'n you did the other day!"

The hostler's grin wiped away. He muttered an excuse and limped hurriedly to the front, calling: "Here, Señor Mike! Everyt'ing quick like you say! *Verdad?*"

"*Verdad,* you lazy scum!"

A slap knocked the hostler against a stall post. With shoulders cringing, he hurried to take the horses.

Thoughtfully Jimmy Christmas rolled a cigarette. Partly hidden behind a harness on a wooden peg, he watched the men up front.

Two of them were bearded. All were dusty from hard riding and wore gun belts. Several took rifles from saddle scabbards. The others held rifles they had been carrying.

The man called Mike was the second tallest. His sombrero shadowed an unshaven face strong, craggy, younger than most of the others. His face was handsome in a hard way.

The man's lithe, quick movements had a certain easy grace. The sombrero was canted at a careless angle, his gun handle of expensive-looking ivory hung low. He would have made two of the hostler he had struck.

Jimmy Christmas shaped the cigarette, lit it and watched the strangers swagger out. He was smoking when the Mexican limped back.

"Señor, w'at I do but let you wait?" the hostler apologized.

"Nothing," Jimmy agreed. "Hurt your leg?"

"That Mike Greer keek me for going too slow."

"He the boss around here?"

"No, señor. Santiago Ramaldo, my oncle, own thees stable."

"Does he get kicked around, too?"

"Hees not here, señor," said the hostler, busying himself with the roan. "W'en you want thees *caballo?*'

"Hard to tell. Who's this Mike Greer?"

"Hees own the Trampas Hotel an' saloon an' the Trampas store."

"I'll tote my rifle along," Jimmy decided.

II.

Running horses, rumbling wheels were on the dusty street when Jimmy Christmas left the barn. A four-horse team of matched grays bolted past, drawing a rumbling stagecoach. Yellow dust drifted over the street as scraping brakeshoes brought the stage to a stop a hundred yards farther on, across the street.

The long, low, adobe building over there had a roof out over the walk and people loitered, watching the stage. That would be the hotel, Mike Greer's

hotel. A yellow-lettered sign read "Trampas Hotel." And beyond that sign a second sign said: "Trampas Hotel Bar." And beyond that was still a third sign: "Trampas Trading Co."

Jimmy Christmas smiled crookedly.

"Got him a good start to branding the whole town. An' then won't he have fun kickin' folks around!"

A weathered canvas sheet over the baggage on top of the stage was being thrown back. Passengers were alighting and entering the hotel. Across the street where Jimmy Christmas stopped, a gaunt young man sat on a narrow porch.

"The stage changes horses here, I reckon," Jimmy commented aloud.

"Yes." The answer was husky, as if from weakness.

The man was pale, wasted, with big cheekbones giving his thin face a gaunt look. An old black suit hung loosely on his big-boned frame. He sat motionless, hands folded on his lap. Beside the door was a near sign bearing the name: Dr. John Magruder.

The narrow porch fronted a small adobe building that had white curtains at the single window. Jimmy Christmas stepped on the porch.

"Is the doc in?" he asked.

"Eh? Oh, yes. I'm Doctor Magruder."

Jimmy grinned. "My mistake. Could you fix up a little scratch, doc?"

Only then did the gaunt young man seem to become aware of his visitor. His look had a burning intentness. "You're a stranger?"

"Sort of."

"Come inside, please."

The doctor got to his feet with visible effort. His set face had no friendliness. The burning look was gone, leaving the eyes cold and noncommittal.

In a back room a table served as desk. A second table was covered by a clean sheet. One shelf was filled with medical books. Another held shining instruments laid out on spotless white napkins. A good doctor, Jimmy Christmas decided. Apparently he hadn't made much money in Trampas.

In silence the doctor examined the arm.

"Cleaning it out will be painful," he said impersonally. "There's some fever. Scratches like this can be dangerous."

The words held no irony. He might have been speaking about a scratch on a door.

"Mighty dangerous if it's deep enough," Jimmy drawled.

The doctor glanced at him, and then busied himself heating water over an oil flame. Silently he cleaned the wound, bandaged it. His big hands worked swiftly, with the deftness of a woman's hands about fine sewing.

The doctor finished and sat down, as if standing, moving, had taken toll of his strength.

"If you're here tomorrow," he said briefly, "let me see the arm again."

"Any reason why I shouldn't be here tomorrow?" Jimmy asked casually.

"None," the doctor replied evenly, "if you don't know of any. The fee will be two dollars."

Queer fellow, Jimmy Christmas thought when he was on the street once more. But no business of his; there was enough on hand now.

Across the street, next to the Trampas Trading Co., was a narrow, false-fronted building of rough-sawed lumber with a painted sign on the window. "Home Meals." And beneath in smaller letters: Susan Gates.

The inside of the restaurant was pleasant. Neat window curtains, counter and tables. Everything scrubbed and spotless, with the smell of fresh coffee and food rousing Jimmy's appetite. Several customers were at the counter. A smiling Mexican girl was waiting on a table, and an American girl was serving one of the men at the counter.

That would be Susan Gates. She was younger than Jimmy Christmas had expected. Pretty, too. Her laugh, her voice to the man she was serving, were low and pleasant.

Jimmy sat down at the back end of the counter and waited until Susan Gates came to him with a friendly smile.

"Coffee, ma'am, steak, fried spuds, and pie, I reckon."

"We've just taken some roast beef out of the oven," she suggested. "It's mighty good. And so are the baked potatoes and gravy."

Jimmy grinned. "You name it and I'll eat it, ma'am. I know it'll be good. Uncle Bill Daley said it would."

Susan Gates was startled, quickly apprehensive. She looked toward the front of the counter, then her eyes swung back to Jimmy Christmas, searching his face. Under her breath she asked: "Do you know Uncle Bill Daley?"

Jimmy nodded. "I've got a letter here that he wrote you."

Susan Gates took the letter almost furtively, rolled it up in a bill of fare out of sight. Her eyes were still searching his face.

"Where is Uncle Billy?" she asked.

"In Palomar, ma'am, cussin' out his luck. The letter'll tell you."

Susan Gates nodded and hurried back into the kitchen with the bill of fare rolled tightly in her hand. Bill Daley had shown the letter to Jimmy. Susan Gates would read:

Dear Susan:

After bein' throwed off ornery cow hosses for thirty-eight years, I had to tromp on a loose step and get me a

busted leg. I ain't no good to myself now, let alone you. The young feller who'll bring this is obleeged to me for a favor and will tend to whatever's worryin' you enough to send for Uncle Bill.

Jimmy Christmas is a gosh-awful liar an' his face ain't to be trusted, but he'll do all he can for you. Ain't any business of you havin' trouble anyway, young lady. Lock up that beanery an' come to Palomar like you should 'a' done a couple of years ago.

Affct. yrs,
Uncle Bill.

Old Bill Daley had grumbled when he had sealed the letter in Palomar.

"She's the spit of her mother, who was my kid sister. Wouldn't come an' live with me after her mother died an' the little ranch had tuh be rented out. She opened up this eatin' place in Trampas an' wrote me it was doin' right well. Don't know why she needs me there, but you can figger that if Sue sent for me, it's real trouble."

Jimmy Christmas rolled another cigarette, whistled softly through his teeth as he looked to the front. No one seemed interested in him. You couldn't tell. Something had caused Sue Gates quick concern when Bill Daley had been mentioned.

Sue Gates returned with bread and cutlery. She was pale, her forced smile met Jimmy's grin.

"I read the letter," Jimmy informed her. "What'll I do, ma'am?"

She searched his face again, swallowed and shook her head.

"I'm sorry you took all this trouble," she said. "There . . . there's nothing to worry about. Uncle Billy shouldn't have gone off half-cocked as he did. Will you take a letter back to him if you're returning to Palomar?"

"I'd hate to go back if the grub here's as good as Uncle Billy said it'd be," Jimmy said regretfully. "Sure, I'll take your letter back. He'll be mighty glad to hear everything's all right. I'll tell him you've got a good-looking young man on your mind and everything's sweet and rosy."

"Yes. Tell him that," said Susan Gates, and the bright sheen of tears was in her eyes as she turned back to the kitchen.

"Hell!" said Jimmy Christmas under his breath. "Must be a sweetheart in it, after all!" He smiled, shrugged. "Bill Daley didn't figure on love. Wonder what he'll say if it turns out he sent me over here to play Cupid?"

The idea was humorous. Jimmy Christmas was smiling when Susan Gates brought his food. More customers entered just then. They came in noisily and the boisterous voice of Mike Greer called. "What you got for us that's good tonight, Miss Susan?"

Slightly mocking, that voice. Greer swept off his sombrero as he walked back, and his dark hair curled damply against his forehead. He was big, graceful, handsome, but Sue Gates answered him coldly.

"Nothing as good as your hotel cook can give you, Mr. Greer."

"You make it taste better," Mike Greer declared. "There ain't anything so pretty and sweet at the hotel, you know."

"What," asked Sue Gates, "will you have, please?"

Mike Greer waved his hand.

"Anything'll taste good as long as you fix it."

The two men who had come in with Greer sat at the counter, grinning. Jimmy Christmas looked around and saw all eyes on Susan Gates and Greer. Her face was flushed, her voice trembled slightly.

"Roast beef, Mr. Greer. Ah Sing fixed it."

Mike Greer laughed. "It don't matter who fixed it just so I can look at you while I'm eating it."

Jimmy Christmas reached over for the salt which was near Mike Greer's elbow. "Got a good room in your hotel tonight, mister?"

Greer was still smiling as he looked the speaker over. "Sure thing, young fellow," he nodded. "Stranger here, I take it?"

"Sort of."

"Come in on the stage?" Greer asked idly, but his eyes went to the rifle leaning against the counter between them, to the wooden-handled revolver tied low, businesslike. "You travel loaded for bear, young fellow."

"I was a orphan raised on bear's milk," Jimmy Christmas said modestly. "I get hungry now an' then and have to hunt me a bear."

One of Greer's men guffawed.

"The kid hotted up your iron, Mike, an' shoved it right back in your hand!"

Mike Greer's eyes slitted for a moment.

"We'll take care of you, if you're staying in Trampas," he said softly.

The same man chortled at that. Greer smiled at his own humor and turned his shoulder to Jimmy Christmas.

Jimmy finished his meal in silence. Mike Greer ate hurriedly, addressed Susan Gates now and then as she passed behind the counter. Jimmy Christmas

was still eating slowly when Greer and his companions left.

Susan Gates brought a sealed envelope addressed to Bill Daley. Jimmy Christmas slipped it into his pocket.

"There ain't anything I can do for you, ma'am?"

"No," Susan Gates denied again. "And if you're wise you'll start back to Palomar in the morning. I . . . I don't think Mike Greer likes you."

"Yes, ma'am," Jimmy Christmas said meekly.

The white-painted hotel lobby opened into Greer's saloon next door. Off the back of the lobby was a lamp-lit dining room where a dozen people were eating. An elderly clerk with drooping gray mustaches guided Jimmy Christmas back to a cubby-hole of a room that held a narrow bed, a chair, wash stand and mirror.

When he was alone, Jimmy Christmas locked the door, pulled down the window shade, tore open the letter to Bill Daley and read it by the oil lamp held in a wall bracket.

Dear Uncle Bill:

I'm so sorry about your leg. Please take care of yourself and don't worry about me. There is trouble here, but plans are made to take care of it. Your Jimmy Christmas is too young and helpless-looking. I'm sending him back with this letter before he gets into trouble around here. And you're not to worry about me. If you don't come to visit me after your leg is well, I'll have to come there to see you.

Love,
Susan.

Jimmy Christmas stepped to the cracked wall mirror.

"It's a hell of a face," he told his reflection in the mirror. "Some day, hombre, that mug'll get you in trouble. If there ain't a kind-hearted lady waiting around to help you."

Whistling, Jimmy Christmas filled the tin basin, washed to the waist, pulled off his boots, and lay flat on the bed with his hands locked under his head.

The day's long ride and Susan Gates' food had made him drowsy. He was asleep in no time. Suddenly a hard slap knocked him awake!

III.

Vaguely Jimmy Christmas remembered having left his belt and gun on a chair by the bed. His hand flashed for the gun while his eyes were still opening. But the chair had been moved.

A big hand hurled Jimmy back on the bed as he came upright.

"You sneakin' young skunk!" Mike Greer said harshly.

Two other men stood beside the bed. The chair and gun belt were behind them. The six-gun had been taken from the holster.

Greer's companions held guns. They were the two who had accompanied Greer into Susan Gates' place. One was stocky, short-legged, short-waisted, powerful, with a close black curly beard. Young-looking behind the beard.

The other was as tall as Mike Greer. But leaner, all corded muscle hung on awkward bones. His arms were long, ears big, a drooping, sandy mustache gave a doleful touch to his mouth. But his eyes were alive, bright, jumping here and there, beneath the down-pulled brim of his weathered Stetson.

Greer's craggy handsome face was threatening as his hand slapped Jimmy's bare shoulder. His fingers dug in painfully as he jerked Jimmy up.

"Don't make a move!" he warned. "You'll get a gun bent over your head!"

"Nary a move," Jimmy Christmas said meekly. "I ain't thinking fast. Usually I ain't slapped awake like this. I'll bet you've got something to tell me."

"Damn right I have!" said Greer. "You're under arrest!"

Jimmy Christmas lowered his feet carefully to the floor. "Who's arresting me?"

"I'm a deputy sheriff," Mike Greer retorted.

"That makes you about everything around Trampas but the Chinese cook, don't it? What am I arrested for?"

"Murder," said Greer. "Never mind denying it. A Trampas man found Tex Anderson's horse running loose with an empty saddle. He tracked and found Anderson's body beside the short cut to Cold Spring. The man that killed Anderson rode this way. We went to the livery stable and had a look at your horse. We could tell by the tracks that it's the one that came from Anderson's body. Got anything to say?"

"Looks like you've said it all."

"Why'd you kill Anderson?"

"I didn't say I did," Jimmy Christmas reminded. "Would there be any reason why this Tex Anderson might want to kill me? I'm a stranger. I wouldn't know Anderson from a bald-faced bull in a cactus patch."

Greer and his two men looked at one another, as if they had been wondering the same thing.

"Look in his coat, Slim," Mike Greer ordered. "Get up, you! Got a money belt?"

"Nope," said Jimmy Christmas. "Someone might hold me up. Look what happened to this friend of yours."

Greer glowered as he searched the prisoner.

"You've got a damned funny way of talking for a smooth-faced kid," he growled. "No money, huh?"

"Not enough to make it worth while for anyone to throw down on me with a gun."

Slim uttered a surprised exclamation.

"Look at this letter, Mike! It's signed 'Susan,' an' reads mighty funny."

Mike Greer grabbed the sheet of paper. His manner was dangerously quiet as he read it. "Did Sue Gates write this?"

"Did she?" asked Jimmy Christmas nonchalantly.

Greer's big fist knocked him back on the bed. Greer towered over him, lips drawn from strong white teeth. "Sue Gates wrote it, didn't she?"

Blood trickled from a corner of Jimmy Christmas' mouth as he sat up. He touched it, looked at the red on his fingertips.

"Some day, mister," he murmured, "you're going to hit the wrong man. If you're telling me who wrote it, I can't stop you."

Greer shoved the letter into his coat pocket.

"She had the right idea, anyway, you helpless young fool!" he said disgustedly. "You're in trouble now! Plenty of trouble! Dammit, I'll find why you came here, and why you killed Tex Anderson! We'll lock you up in the storeroom, until you start to the jail at the county seat. And by then you'll tell us what you know about this!"

"Let me get my clothes on," Jimmy Christmas suggested mildly.

Guns had been holstered. Jimmy wiped the blood from his lip, put on his boots. Slim sneered at him.

"This kid ain't got the guts of a rabbit. How come he killed Tex?"

The bearded man spoke for the first time. "The Gates girl might know. Anything in that letter about Magruder?"

"Not in the letter," said Greer. "We'll find out about that, too—in the storeroom."

The bearded man looked at his hands. Wide, thick-fingered, powerful hands. His lips were moist, red, in the curly beard as he smiled. "Yeah," he agreed. "In the storeroom."

"My shirt," murmured Jimmy Christmas. He stepped past them to the chair near which his shirt had fallen to the floor.

"Who's this Bill Daley?" Slim demanded.

"We'll find that out, too," Greer snapped—as Jimmy Christmas smashed the wadded shirt and his fist against the wall lamp.

The men were off-guard, unsuspecting, busy with their own thoughts. The thin glass chimney shattered in midair and blackness fell over the room with the force of a blow. Eyes still filled with light were dazzled, blinded.

Like a phantom, Jimmy Christmas moved once more. The shattered lamp chimney was still falling when he yanked the chair up and straight-armed it through the blackness to the window.

They were blinded, still confused as the chair crashed into the window glass.

"Stop him!" Mike Greer bawled. "There at the window!"

A blasting gun preceded Greer's charge to the window. The muzzle flashes made vicious red spurts in the darkness. The other two men followed to the window.

Jimmy Christmas left the wall where he had silently flattened himself. Greer's roaring guns blotted out all other sounds. The men had leaned Jimmy's rifle against the wall. He found the cold metal barrel.

"Where in thunder is he?" Mike Greer yelled. "Strike a match! He ain't got a gun!"

Jimmy Christmas reached the door, shirt and rifle in one hand. He yanked the door open and jumped into the lighted hallway. The slamming door cut off a shout of discovery back in the room. Bullets splintered through the door and thudded into the opposite wall.

The gray-mustached hotel clerk and two other men stared speechlessly at the lobby end of the hall. Jimmy Christmas dived toward them with the rifle up threateningly. They scrambled back out of sight.

A door toward the lobby opened and Jimmy Christmas hurled himself against it. The door flew back against an astonished fat man in a night shirt, who cried out in protest.

Jimmy dodged inside, slammed the door. A wall lamp burned dimly.

"Got a gun?" Jimmy demanded.

"N-no! What's wrong here?"

"Keep quiet!"

The window was down and latched. As Jimmy unlatched it and shoved it up he heard Mike Greer shouting in the hall. Outside it was moonless, dark, and quiet. The hotel extended back twice as far as the adjoining saloon. The stars were bright cold points of light in a cloudless sky. Jimmy Christmas was outside the window when the room door flew open and Mike Greer yelled, "Where is he?"

Saloon and store loomed darkly to the right. Mike Greer's saloon. Mike Greer's store. And beyond them was Susan Gates' small restaurant.

As he ran, Jimmy Christmas yanked on the shirt. He shoved the tail under his belt as he ducked into the narrow space between Sue Gates' place and the store. The restaurant windows were dark. Hard to tell how late it was. The saloon was still open.

Three horses were at the hitch rack in front of the saloon. Across the street, toward the livery stable, was another bar, also lighted. The walk in front of Mike Greer's building was deserted. Loiterers would be inside watching the trouble.

Three horses. Panting, Jimmy Christmas clawed the reins free, swung up on a horse, led the other two off at a gallop. He was a hundred yards away when the first gun opened up behind him.

Jimmy Christmas grinned and galloped on north out of town on the dusty road. A mile out of town he turned the two spare horses loose and rode to the right, letting his mount pick its way up the rising slope away from the river. He buttoned his shirt, turned the collar up against the night chill. Now that the excitement was over, the wounded arm felt stiff, sore.

The horse gained the malpais height above the river valley. Lights in Trampas were faint dots back there in the night. Jimmy turned and rode back toward them.

"In Cold Spring," Jimmy mused, "this Tex Anderson got wind I knew the lady. And he went gunning for me. Might be he aimed to talk a little first. But about what? He was dying, an' he laughed. How come? He was sure I'd get shot up. For why? Because I killed him?"

Aloud Jimmy Christmas said: "I want a cigarette. I want a six-gun, too. Ain't this a hell of a way to play Cupid for old Bill Daley!"

The high road by the river was deserted. Jimmy Christmas whistled softly through his teeth as he rode back toward Trampas on the heights. Here was mystery and trouble if the sign read right.

Trampas came abreast and below once more. The horse found the Cold Spring trail and turned toward town, throwing up his head as the drum roll of galloping hoofs came from Trampas.

Half a dozen riders were leaving the town there, riding hard to the south—instead of the north where Jimmy Christmas had gone.

Wary, alert, Jimmy walked the horse down to the edge of Trampas and turned up the dusty street that paralleled the high road.

Lights burned in some of the houses. People were awake. But Trampas was calm, not seething, not excited about a stranger who had killed Tex Anderson. No sign of a posse collecting to hunt Jimmy Christmas down.

IV.

An alley ran behind the livery stable and the buildings along the main street. Jimmy stopped in the alley and walked quietly to the back of the low little house where Dr. John Magruder lived.

The place was dark. Doors and windows were locked. Jimmy mounted again, rode on toward the livery stable, and left the horse again and drifted into the pungent gloom of the stable.

A lamp burned in the office. Tobacco smoke hung heavy in the air. The office door opened and Jimmy faded back into a stall.

"If you find out anything more, Pedro, let me know," a woman's troubled voice said. "He's no more to be trusted than Jack Terry's scut of a hound dog that's always trying to kill my cat. Ah, the poor girl! I'm wishing I was a man or had men folks to do something about it!"

"Would you be talking about Susan Gates, ma'am?" asked Jimmy Christmas, leaving the stall.

She gasped, standing there broad and stout by the office door. "The Lord have mercy! It must be the young man Susan was worried about! The one they were shooting at!"

"Where is she, ma'am?" Jimmy asked.

The woman was gray-haired, stout, with a broad, forceful face.

"You'll not be seeing Susan tonight," she answered bluntly. "She left Trampas an hour ago with that poor, sick young man of hers. And that scut of a bully, Mike Greer, has just beat the truth out of Pedro, here, and gone after her. And it's the Widow Callahan telling you, young man, I'm wishing they'd gone the other way after *you*, instead of poor Susan."

Jimmy Christmas entered the cluttered, dusty little office.

"Señor," said the Mexican hostler in a dull voice. He hunched on the edge of an old cot, holding a bloody handkerchief to his nose.

The Widow Callahan joined them and closed the door. Her voice shook with indignation.

"I knew the scut was up to no good when I found him in my doorway. 'Those as live in my house are no business of yours,' I told him. 'Susan isn't here and don't be bothering me about her.' He only laughed. 'Doc Magruder's gone, too,' he said. 'Would she be out with him?'

" 'No business of yours,' I told him.

" 'I'm the law in Trampas, Mrs. Callahan,' he said, 'and I'm on the law's business now. Where did Susan Gates go?'

" 'To heaven, I hope,' I told him. 'For she'll never be seeing you there. And law or no law, I'm going back to bed, so get out of my doorway!' "

"And he came here?" said Jimmy.

"*Si*," mumbled the young Mexican. "W'at I do for all this? W'at I know?"

"You knew enough," retorted the Widow Callahan. "The doctor keeps his buggy here."

"She went south?" asked Jimmy.

"That she did," the Widow Callahan answered. "And afraid I am of what will happen if Greer catches them. Once he almost killed the doctor with a bullet and perjured himself out of it. He'll be welcoming another chance before Dr. John gets well enough to kill him."

"Got a six-gun around here?" Jimmy Christmas asked the Mexican.

"My oncle's gun, señor."

"Get it."

The Widow Callahan sniffed.

"You'll only make it worse. Mike Greer will do

worse to you than he did to Dr. John. I tell you Susan was near to crying when she found there was no hope from her Uncle Bill."

"I see," said Jimmy Christmas dryly. "She's too kind-hearted. Why did Greer shoot the doctor?"

"Why?" asked the Widow Callahan indignantly. "Holy Mother! For nothing save the black heart of him that's greedy and cruel and won't have another man standing up to him. The doctor wouldn't take Greer's orders, and the ranch people started bringing their troubles to him. Mike Greer couldn't stand that.

"And when rustlers shot old Jerky Benson and the trail they left was plain, and Mike Greer with his deputy's badge didn't do anything about it, Dr. John got a bullet in his chest for telling Greer what kind of a deputy he was. Greer's friends were there. The doctor had a gun in his pocket. They swore Greer thought he was going to use it. And since then everybody's known that Trampas wouldn't hold Mike Greer and the doctor both. Day after day the doctor sits there on his porch waiting to get well, and Mike Greer waits knowing better than anybody else there'll be a settlement between them when the doctor is well. And poor Susan breaking her heart for fear her man will get killed. And nothing she can do. The doctor won't listen to her and leave."

The hostler had brought out a gun belt. Jimmy Christmas took the gun out, emptied the cylinder and tried hammer and trigger. He strapped on the gun belt, holstered the gun, drew it with a lightning motion, replaced it and made another lightning draw.

The Mexican stared in amazement.

"*Dios!* He's too fas' to see!"

"So there's rustlers," Jimmy Christmas said briefly to the Widow Callahan. "Some sense to that. And Mike Greer shot the doc who didn't like how he handled the rustlers. Has there been much rustling, much trouble around here?"

"Sense?" said the Widow Callahan indignantly. "He wanted to murder the doctor, though most folks are afraid to say so. Yes, there's been rustling. But not among Mike Greer's friends. And most folks won't say that either. But I'll say it. And Dr. John said it. Six years ago Mike Greer got off the stage here with a deck of cards and a gambler's crooked tricks. And look at him today! He'll own the whole Trampas range if he keeps on. I could shake a stick over all that he's earned honestly. Draw that gun again, young man!"

Jimmy Christmas looked at her. His blurring hand made the gun leap from the holster.

Hands on her broad hips, the Widow Callahan nodded.

"Susan didn't see that," she said, "or she wouldn't have sent you away. How many men have you killed, young man?"

Jimmy met her shrewd look and had to chuckle.

"Six, ma'am, counting one today. And I started none of it. Where did the doctor and his lady go? Her Uncle Bill Daley thinks a heap of her. I promised him I'd fix her trouble."

"God bless you!" said the Widow Callahan huskily. "She's a sweet girl and she needs help like my Danny Callahan would have given her, if he was still alive. Her Dr. John is up to something with some of his friends among the small ranchers and homesteaders. What it is, Susan wouldn't be telling me exactly. But I can guess."

"*I* can't guess, ma'am," Jimmy Christmas suggested.

"I talk too much," sighed the Widow Callahan. "Of course I do. But sometimes I'm worth listening to. They're out on the range there, little ranchers, homesteaders, trying to hold what they've got against starvation cattle prices, rustlers, faulty water rights, land titles and debts they owe. Small wonder they give up and sell or forfeit their land. And the Trampas Cattle Company is always waiting for what they leave."

"Mike Greer?" Jimmy Christmas asked.

"Yes," said the Widow Callahan. "They've had no leader until Dr. John got out among them doctoring their sick for little pay, and no pay many's the time. Dr. John it was who showed them there was more to the Trampas range than little homesteaders and the Trampas Cattle Company. Dr. John it was who started them to believing that Mike Greer's laugh had more than friendship and Mike Greer's help was no help at all if a small man would keep what he had."

"If I was Greer," Jimmy Christmas murmured, "I'd not be laughing at that."

"If you were Greer," the Widow Callahan said, "you'd use your gun like he did. But even Mike Greer couldn't murder a man while he was helpless from a bullet wound. Where did Susan go? Tonight she said: 'I'll have no help, I see. John will be killed if this keeps up. He's getting well and Mike Greer's waiting. John won't leave Trampas. Running away, he calls it.' Tonight Susan said: 'They reported rustling south of Arroyo Seco yesterday and nothing has been done about it. If I can make John see it's time he took the lead again, he'll go out there. He'll be among his friends and not think it's running away. I want him to go tonight.'"

"Arroyo Seco, ma'am? How do I get there?" demanded Jimmy.

"Pedro," said the Widow Callahan, "haven't you got relatives living out that way?"

"Tomas Ramaldo, my cousin," the Mexican answered. "Seex miles south, señor, wan leetle road

goes off across the river to Arroyo Seco. One hour you ride, maybe more, an' see wan leetler road to the left again to Arroyo Seco."

"Susan," continued the Widow Callahan, "didn't say, but I'm guessing they was going to see old Bar Tack Johnson first. He lives alone out there near the Seco and runs a couple of hundred cattle by himself. The rustlers picked on him this last time. Bar Tack isn't like some of the others. He'll be ready for trouble if he gets any help at all."

"I want a horse," Jimmy Christmas said. "The best one that's left in the barn."

"Quick, Pedro," the Widow Callahan urged. "Or it's myself will get behind you! Quick, and it's myself who'll fix your face after he's gone!"

Six miles south along the high road, and Jimmy Christmas came to a small side road branching off to the right, fording the river half a mile away and striking out across the Trampas range.

The running horse struck rhythm against the quiet of the empty night. The brief rest in Mike Greer's hotel had given Jimmy Christmas fresh strength and a borrowed jumper from the livery stable held off the night chill.

Overhead, the stars looked low, cold, brilliant. And somewhere ahead in the great sweep of empty range was Susan Gates and her young doctor. And Mike Greer and his riders.

Jimmy thought of the bearded man on the Cold Spring trail. Death there, cold-blooded, ruthless. He thought of the young doctor's wan bleak face as he dressed his arm. Jimmy Christmas might have been one of Greer's men, might have been an outlaw off the Trampas range. No friend at least for the man who sat alone, unafraid, across from Mike Greer's hotel and waited for a gun wound to heal.

"And that," said Jimmy Christmas aloud, "took guts. He didn't have a chance against Greer an' the skunks who follow Greer. He knowed they'd get his scalp first chance. No wonder Bill Daley's girl was primed for trouble. And now she's got it!"

The left-hand fork was there an hour from the river, more or less, two ruts worn deep beneath the stars and sable sky. Jimmy Christmas dismounted where the ruts forked and examined the road dust by match light.

Here were tracks—horse tracks, wheel tracks, man tracks. Booted feet had tramped over the last wheel tracks. Two burned matches were there in the road, and a cigarette end.

"*Bueno,*" Jimmy Christmas softly grunted. "Greer knowed what he wanted an' where to find it."

Back in the saddle and riding on, Jimmy grinned thinly.

"*Bueno.* I know what *I* want and where to find it. And that'll be one thing that Greer forgot about. If I ain't too late. Or is Greer riding for a quick killing?"

The sign on the trail, the empty night, had no answer to that. Jimmy Christmas pushed his horse. The trail struck a crooked way through broken, rolling ridges covered with scattered brush. Off to the left, the steep side of a high butte towered blackly in the starlight.

And off to the right, far off to the right, a dog barked faintly. Two faint clear gunshots cut through the sound. Jimmy Christmas reined up, listening. The dog did not bark again.

But as Jimmy Christmas sat there with the slow cold night wind sweeping past the sweating horse, a man screamed out there in the night where the dog had been barking. No doubt of it—a man in agony crying to the empty sky, the whispering wind, the lonely night.

And then silence.

The oath that slipped from Jimmy Christmas was hard and cold. The hand of Mike Greer was behind that scream. Had to be. Nothing else could cause it.

And Greer over there must mean he had found the young doctor and Susan Gates. Out there alone! Out there helpless! Jimmy Christmas swung the horse off the road toward the sound.

The scant short grass and soft range dirt muted the driving hoofs under him. Six-gun and rifle were cold and ready to his touch. He was riding up a draw that swung to the left and was cut by ruts which the horse swerved to follow.

The landscape here was rolling, broken. A man could not see far. Jimmy decided to dismount and

inspect the road, but the drumming roll of galloping horses held him in the saddle.

They were coming toward him. He barely had time to wheel back from the ruts, spur behind scanty brush when they thundered up through the faint starlight, swept past and were gone in the night.

Half a dozen riders there were, maybe more, dark blurs in the night riding hell-for-leather from the shots, the scream. And their passing left a sinister

spell that held Jimmy Christmas motionless and staring after them.

Like that men would ride to trouble—and like that men might ride from the guilt they wanted to leave, forget. It was hard to decide whether to follow them or see what they had left back there in the night.

V.

Tight-lipped, hard-faced, Jimmy Christmas turned his horse in the direction in which he had heard the dog bark. Now he, too, rode fast and recklessly.

The winding road suddenly threw him out on a small flat between the ridges. Ahead of him a rectangle of feeble yellow light marked the open doorway of a house. It was too late now to hide his coming. A small adobe, squatting low and small on the flat, with a building or two off to the left and a dark line that would be a corral.

Here the dog had barked, the cry of agony lifted on the night. Here, by all the sign, should be a buggy. But there was no buggy that Jimmy Christmas could see as he rode to the house. Only a woman who showed in the doorway for a moment, peering out. Then she shrank back out of sight.

"Miss Gates!" Jimmy called, pulling up before the house. "Doc! Doc Magruder, are you here?"

He'd not have shown his hand like this another time. But the sign had been too clear, and the riders were gone. And there was the cold gnawing fear for Susan Gates.

The woman appeared in the doorway again, and she was not Susan Gates. She was a Mexican woman, stooped and old before her time with work. Barefooted, clad in a dress and black shawl over her head, she quavered in Spanish:

"Señor, you will enter?"

Jimmy Christmas sprang down and shouldered into the low doorway. "What happened here?" he demanded.

The woman backed away before him. And a gritting voice to the right of the door held death.

"Drop them guns!"

The level rifle muzzle was not four feet away. Certain death. Sure death. It was the man with the bearded face, the moist, red, mocking lips who had been in the hotel room back in Trampas. Jimmy Christmas dropped the six-gun and rifle he was carrying.

"I should have taken my time an' smelled skunk on the wind," he said. "Where's Doc Magruder?"

"On his way to hell, for makin' trouble where trouble ain't wanted," growled the bearded man. "An' you'll meet him there or I miss my guess, you damned young squirt! Git over there in the corner beside that *pelado* an' the kids before I blow your head off. An' don't waste no time about it!"

Crossing herself, the Mexican woman had backed to one side, where an old table held a smoking oil lamp, coffeepot, tin cup, and a stack of cold tortillas.

On a bed in the back corner huddled a booted, spurred Mexican with a beaten, bloody face. A boy and girl, wide-eyed and terrified, crouched on the bed beside him. The girl was sniffling.

Jimmy Christmas went to the edge of the bed. "Women an' kids are about your outfit's size, ain't they?" he drawled.

The man swore. "More of that lip an' you'll get what that *pelado* got! An' by the way he howled, it ain't a sweet dose!"

The Mexican's forehead was torn. Blood had seeped into his hair and down into his eyes. He stirred, and a low groan came through his teeth.

"What's you do to him?" Jimmy Christmas asked.

The moist, red lips grinned again in the curly beard. Thick-fingered hands gripped the rifle as if they wanted to use it.

"They give him a head band of rope an' screwed it tight with the end of a rifle barrel," said the bearded man. "His brains woulda squirted if he hadn't opened up an' talked. The same as yours'll squirt if you don't come clean about Tex Anderson an' how come you're mixin' in all this, you murderin', hoss-thievin' young sneak! Mike Greer's lookin' for you for stealin' them horses in Trampas. A rope'll be what the boys'll give you before Mike can git you to jail!"

Jimmy Christmas grinned. "Horse thieves don't get much show around Trampas, do they?"

"You're damned right they don't!"

"Except," added Jimmy Christmas, "when they're Mike Greer's friends."

"Greer'll want to talk to you or I'd fix your talky mouth right now!"

Jimmy Christmas sat on the edge of the bed and took the tobacco sack from his pocket.

"If Greer wants me that bad, I guess there ain't any use worrying until he sees me. Funny you wasting your time around here while the others smoked on away. Doc Magruder didn't stop here, did he?"

"Keep that damn mouth shut!"

The bed creaked as the Mexican stirred. Jimmy Christmas grinned as he shaped and sealed the cigarette.

"As long as I've got to wait for Greer, I'll talk," he said easily. "It'll take a gun barrel over my head to stop me."

"By hell, you'll get it!"

The bearded man set the rifle beside the door, drew his six-gun, bent his knees and gathered up the rifle and revolver Jimmy had dropped inside the door. Jimmy Christmas lit his cigarette. His grin was taut, tight, over an almost bloodless face.

Sitting there on the edge of the bed, he was like a slender spring wound tight and ready, although a man would have to look close to see it.

Smoke dribbled from his nose as he watched the bearded man set the second rifle beside the other one. And behind on the bed the half-dressed little girl sniffled her fright, and her father rolled half over with a sobbing breath.

"I'll fix you worse'n Greer fixed that damned Mex," said the bearded man, taking cartridges from the revolver he had picked off the floor.

"Maybe," said Jimmy Christmas, and behind him the Mexican stirred again and something hard prodded against Jimmy's hip. He put his hand back there.

The gun was warm, as if it had been held against a man's body or under it. A .44 by the feel, single-action and loaded or it wouldn't be where it was. The Mexican had been covering it as he huddled there half-dead between his two children.

The bearded man tossed the empty revolver under the table and fired a shot in the dirt floor at Jimmy's feet. His voice was harsh after the gun crash.

"Git up and get it, you young squirt!" he ordered.

"Couldn't we step outside?" asked Jimmy Christmas. "The little girl's scared, an' you might hurt her throwin' lead around that way so reckless."

"Damn her! Git up!"

"Bueno," Jimmy Christmas murmured. "You'll have your way or bust."

Sneering, the Greer man waited, gun loosely ready with the muzzle sagging toward the floor. It was almost funny to see the way his eyes bulged when Jimmy Christmas came to his feet, holding the revolver loosely. His face, a pale, grinning mask, Jimmy Christmas said, "All right, bust! I'm waitin'!"

The bearded man was swearing as his gun whipped up. And his eyes, still bulging, could hardly have seen the leap of the old single-action. Two shots smashed him before his gun went off wildly and without aim. He fell back into the doorway, dropping the gun and rolling convulsively over on his face.

The little girl was screaming with fright as Jimmy Christmas jumped to the man and yanked him over.

"Where did Greer go? What's he up to, leaving you here while he went on?"

But the man's look was already clouding. His face was going slack under the curly beard. In a minute he was gone. That made two dead in this business of Trampas and Susan Gates.

The mute, terrified Mexican woman was still huddled against the wall. Her man was heaving himself painfully over the edge of the bed when Jimmy Christmas turned to talk to him.

"Finished," Jimmy said. "Stop the *muchacha* crying. You, hombre! Can you talk?"

"Si, señor," the man mumbled, holding his bloody head.

"What's your name? What happened here?"

"Tomas Ramaldo my name," the man groaned. "Ramaldo? That's luck. Pedro Ramaldo sent me out this way after Doc Magruder. I'm a friend. What happened?"

The story came in a dazed flood of talk while the man held his head and his wife tried to calm the terrified children.

They had been asleep when the doctor's buggy had stopped out front. Ramaldo had gone out, had been told that the doctor wanted all the small homesteaders and ranchers to meet him at Bar Tack Johnson's place on the other side of the Arroyo Seco in the morning. The quicker the better. Object: to do something about rustlers and troubles on the Trampas range.

Ramaldo and his older son, Pancho, had saddled the two horses in the corral. Pancho had started immediately in a great circle that would take him down to Seco and south across Jack Flats toward Cactus Creek and the small outfits scattered over the south end of the range.

Tomas Ramaldo had waited for the coffee his wife was heating before riding up the Seco and swinging north with the same message. His saddled horse had been outside when Greer's bunch had ridden up.

They had tracked the doctor there. Greer himself, with a rope and a rifle barrel, had gotten the truth about the saddled horse, about Pancho, who had ridden away, and the meeting the doctor was calling.

Greer had left the bearded man to watch the place, had sent another man after Pancho, and spurred off with the others.

"Can you ride now?" Jimmy Christmas asked Ramaldo.

"Señor, my head—"

"It'll hurt worse if Mike Greer's men come back," Jimmy Christmas reminded. "I've got to get to this Bar Tack Johnson's place fast. Ain't there a short cut you can show me?"

"W'at you do? They keel you!"

"I take a heap of killin'," Jimmy Christmas declared. "Look, hombre! You can't help these kids and your wife now. They'll be safer without you. I ain't got time to get lost or ride circle trying to find this Johnson's place."

"Si, señor."

Jimmy strapped on both gun belts and dragged the body outside. Ramaldo's horse was tied to the corral fence. They left the house dark, the door bolted, and rode across the range, angling away

from the rutted little road over which Greer's men had raced.

The night would have baffled a stranger. There was no trail. The brush ridges, draws, slashing arroyos and scattered flats were a maze that would have swallowed and confused a galloping rider not sure of the exact way.

Tomas Ramaldo had been groggy when he forked the saddle. But he had set his feet carefully in the stirrups and thereafter burred there like part of the saddle.

He rode like a wild man, spurring across ridges and draws, bolting up the sandy twisting beds of shallow arroyos, now and then bursting through brush that all but raked them from the saddles. Jimmy Christmas had to ride hard to keep up. Tomas Ramaldo did not look back nor wait.

They came to the Arroyo Seco. It could not have been anything else. A vast black chasm with precipitous sides opened suddenly before them. The Mexican seemed to vanish, as if his horse had plunged off into space.

Jimmy Christmas swore under his breath, set himself, gave his horse free rein. The next moment he was plunging down through space. Shod hoofs striking sparks from stones below showed that Ramaldo was descending the same way. And just when it seemed that a horse could not keep his feet and plunge on down and down this way, they had reached the bottom, racing through chamiza thickets on the wide bottom of the Seco.

Ramaldo reined up sharply beside a shallow stream. The other side of the Seco loomed darkly before them. Water rippled around stones in the stream bed. The blowing horses fought to bury their muzzles in the water. Tomas Ramaldo spoke in the hollow flat voice of a man driving himself on nerve and nothing else.

"Thees the Seco. Two-t'ree mile ahead ees Johnson place. You go?"

"Shucks,, yes," said Jimmy Christmas. "Fast as we can make it. How much start did Doc Magruder have?"

"How I know? T'irty minute, *quién sabe?*"

"Enough start to get to the Johnson place before Greer caught up?"

"*Quién sabe?*"

"*Quién sabe*, hell!" roared Jimmy Christmas. "Nobody ever knows anything in time around this damn range! I'm always late. An' it'll be too bad for them two if I'm late again. Did Doc Magruder have a gun?"

"*Quién sabe?*"

"One more '*quién sabe*' an' I'll bust wide open. See how fast you can get to the Johnson place."

"Our horses, señor," said Tomas Ramaldo in that same hollow voice. "W'at we do eef thees men there an' our horses don' ron moch more? How we run away?"

"I'll show you when we find the doc."

"You laugh?" Ramaldo said somberly.

"Why not?"

"W'en a rope squeeze your head in two, señor, you don' laugh."

"Sure. I know. Hell to think about, ain't it? I don't blame you. Well, show me this Bar Tack Johnson's place and vamose back to your family an' hide 'em out where they can't be found until you know what's what."

"And you, señor?" asked Tomas Ramldo as he sent his horse splashing across the water.

"How do I know?" shrugged Jimmy Christmas. "I haven't got a family and I ain't had a rope screwed tight around my head. We'll see."

Ramaldo skirted the looming ascent for a quarter of a mile before he put his horse to the apparently impassable rise. All the way up it seemed that the horses would slip and flounder back to the bottom. But they made the top.

Beyond the Seco rim were more ridges, more brush and broken country. You could see how small outfits back in here, one-man spreads like that of Bar Tack Johnson, could be meat for rustlers and range hogs.

A mile beyond the Seco, Tomas Ramaldo stopped wordlessly.

Jimmy Christmas heard the thin, far snap of scattered shots before Ramaldo spoke. They came on the whispering wind, those shots. They drifted under the bright cold stars in little lashing pellets of sound that carried their own grim story.

"Too late!" said Jimmy Christmas quietly. "Greer's caught 'em!"

"*Si,*" Tomas Ramaldo agreed.

And still the far faint guns pricked the night with ragged spurts of sound.

Jimmy Christmas drew a long breath.

"But he ain't got 'em yet," he guessed. "That's a fight, not a massacre. The doc must've had a gun and got holed up before he was cornered. I've got the trail now. Adios!"

Ramaldo sat his horse silently while Jimmy

Christmas rode on. Jimmy didn't blame the man. Death had touched him once tonight with the white fire of agony. He'd come this far against his will. He was only a poverty-stricken Mexican who'd get scant mercy from Greer's bunch. It wasn't his quarrel. What was a girl named Susan Gates to Tomas Ramaldo?

Guns dotted the night with sharp reports that died away, then ripped out afresh in vicious bursts, dwindled to loose potting shots, paused, and burst out again. Guns, louder and louder under the stars ahead as Jimmy Christmas rode fast.

Suddenly the guns were just ahead beyond a brushy ridge; then the guns went silent and a voice was shouting something.

VI.

Jimmy Christmas walked his lathered horse cautiously to the foot of the ridge, dismounted, tied the reins to a head-high bush and climbed the steep slope on foot with his finger ready on the rifle trigger.

No need to wonder what would happen if Greer's bunch caught him out here afoot. They'd hunt him down like a rabbit, a horse thief, a killer. They'd ride him down, corner him, throw lead from cover until they had him.

Greer's cards were on the table now. Control of Trampas and the Trampas range was worth a few dead men. Greer would not stop now until he'd brushed aside all threat to his plans. The law—Greer's law—would make it right. Mike Greer was the sort who'd see to that.

Then suddenly everything spread out before Jimmy Christmas, blurred, indistinct in the starlight. That dark little one-room hut down the brushy slope which formed the head of a draw, would be Bar Tack Johnson's place. A small, open shed was barely visible off to the left against the side of the draw. Beside the shed was a corral and the gaunt frame of a windmill.

The dark hut looked deserted. The brushy sides of the draw seemed empty of all life as Jimmy Christmas crouched on the ridge at the head of the draw. The guns were silent now and the voice had stopped.

Then back of the open shed to the left of the house the voice shouted again.

"How about it, Johnson? Put him outa there!"

A nasal reply came from the hut.

"Go to hell, Greer! I ain't puttin' no one out! You an' them bootlickin' gun-toters ain't comin' in to get no one! This is private land! I've warned yuh off!"

"This is the law, Johnson! You've been warned that Magruder is hooked up with an outlaw killer an' horse thief and is wanted for questioning. Put him out here or by damn we'll take him no matter what happens to you and the lady!"

"You been tryin' to take him. Grabbin' his hosses an' buggy don't make you any better'n a hoss thief. If you wolves are runnin' short of lead, that dirty double tongue of yourn ain't doin' any good either. The doc's safe in here."

Greer's argumentative calmness was strange, Jimmy Christmas thought, remembering the man's temper.

"Magruder will be safe enough if he shows he had nothing to do with that young killer. But he's got to go back to Trampas or take his chances. That goes for you, too, Johnson, unless you put him out."

There was silence for a few minutes. Then Dr. John Magruder called from the hut:

"Greer, I've decided to go back to Trampas with you! Miss Gates may be killed by your bullets! Have I your word that you'll show her every consideration?"

"Hell, yes!" called Greer, suddenly jovial. "She'll get treated like she was my sister!"

Susan Gates' shaken voice came from the dark hut.

"John isn't coming out! We won't let him! If he's got to be killed, we'll take our chances here with him. He's not going out there to your cowardly killers!"

"That's right!" Bar Tack Johnson added violently. "The doc's stayin' right here if we have to sit on him! An' we got plenty of lead to back it up!"

As Johnson's voice died away, a sharp gun report smashed the night outside the hut. Jimmy Christmas saw the faint spurt of muzzle fire against the wall on the side that faced Greer and his gunhands.

An exultant yell came from the spot.

"Johnson's hit! Heered the gal yell it out! We got 'em now, boys!"

While Greer had talked to the besieged trio, a man had crawled unnoticed to the hut for a surprise shot. Now he crouched at the hut corner where guns inside couldn't reach him. The black shadows made him invisible from the ridge where Jimmy Christmas stood. And he'd be there to shoot again through any crack the doctor or Susan Gates used for their guns.

"All right, boys!" Mike Greer yelled. "You know what to do!"

Jimmy Christmas started down the slope. For the moment the guns were silent. He was halfway down the slope when running steps closed in from the right. A crouching, dodging figure came through the brush, calling, "That you, Shorty?"

"Uh-huh," muttered Jimmy Christmas with his gun cocked and ready.

"Ain't any use closin' in so fast! We got 'em! They can't get help for eight-ten hours! Maybe not then if Mort Carson ketches that young Mex who rode off with the doc's message. We'll ease in close an' take 'em easy! That damn Bar Tack Johnson was the one that made the trouble! I thought yuh was over to my right, Shorty. I ain't heard your gun over this way."

The man stepped in close, peering—and his yell rang out as he swung his rifle up.

"*Here's that killer kid!*"

Jimmy Christmas' crashing short gun drove him plunging and kicking against a dry bush and down beside it. The rifle fired with a loud report as Jimmy ducked away down the slope. Behind him the man's voice broke in a scream of warning:

"He's runnin' for the house! The kid that kilt Tex Anderson! He shot me—"

The frenzied scream broke off, but the wounded man had strength enough to claw out his six-gun and start shooting from the ground.

For long moments they seemed to be alone—that dying man and Jimmy Christmas dodging down through the brush with lead singing wildly after him.

The others could hear him running, he knew. Maybe they could see his shadowy form running through the starlight.

"Get him!" Mike Greer bawled.

Guns opened up from both sides of the draw. Rifles, six-guns, roaring, crashing, licking flame, pouring a furious sleet of lead across the path to the hut.

Jimmy Christmas held his fire and ran. A gun flashed at the hut corner as the man crouching there sighted him and opened fire. Jimmy Christmas had been waiting for that gun to show. He had to know where the skulker was and settle him before he could get into the hut.

The man shot Jimmy's hat off. A bullet from the side knocked the high-pointed heel off his left riding boot. He was in the open now, faintly visible under the stars. Lead was coming closer. A bullet struck his leg halfway above the knee, almost throwing him with the shock.

He caught his balance with a lunging step and went on. The leg felt numb, wooden. But it worked, it covered ground, brought him to the hut—and to Greer's skulking killer, who was holding his ground and pumping shots.

Jimmy held his fire until he was close, and then triggered his six-gun and plunged at the man. One of them would have to drop as they came together. Greer's man broke first and lunged away, and the last bullet in Jimmy's gun knocked him over.

A moment later Jimmy Christmas was against the hut's adobe wall, against the plank door, gasping, "Open up! It's Jimmy Christmas!"

A bullet thudded into the door as he waited. Maybe the doctor and Susan Gates would think it was a trick, would not open the door! And then what for Jimmy Christmas? But the door swung in. Jimmy dived into the pitch blackness inside, heard the door slam, a bar drop into place. A match flared.

"It's him!" said Doc Magruder's husky voice. "Susan, stay away from that window! There may be another gun just outside!"

"Not yet!" Jimmy Christmas panted. "I got the one that was out there. What'd he do to Johnson?"

"Creased his skull with a bullet! Maybe fractured it. I haven't got time to find out now!" said the doctor. "Who did you bring with you?"

"Nobody. You two all right?"

"No," the doctor cried bitterly. "I'm only half a man when I'm needed most! No strength! I should have gone out when I could have helped Susan and Johnson. They'd have been all right then."

"Not with Mike Greer," said Susan Gates in the darkness. "He's gone too far already. He'd have killed you, John, and found some reason for it! You know it. Bar Tack did, too! As soon as Mike Greer said he'd read my note to Bill Daley, I knew he'd decided to get you out of the way."

"Does that matter when all this is endangering you?" young Doc Magruder said wearily.

"Oh, John," Susan Gates murmured tenderly. "As if I'd want to live without you."

"Guns and not love-makin' will settle this now," Jimmy Christmas put in dryly. "And we ain't any worse off than before Johnson got dropped. I'm in here now and there's two less outside to worry about. As long as we've got plenty of cartridges, we can stand them off."

"Johnson was bluffing," Doc Magruder said heavily. "We haven't cartridges. No one expected this. There weren't a dozen rounds left when Johnson was hit."

"Johnson," Jimmy Christmas remarked ruefully, "was a mighty convincing liar. He sure made it sound like he had a roomful of cartridges. I was set to outshoot 'em till the cows come home or help arrived. This puts us in a pickle."

"You might get away in the darkness," Magruder suggested curtly.

"That's an idea. What'd you two do?"

"I can't believe Greer would harm Susan."

"I could believe most anything about the gent," Jimmy Christmas retorted. "And Cupid never did a good job by sending a bridegroom out like a lamb to be slaughtered, that's one sure thing."

"Cupid?" said Doc Magruder.

Jimmy Christmas grinned in the darkness.

"Six-guns instead of arrows, doc. It's the first time I ever filled a hand for Cupid. Old Bill Daley'll call me a liar when he hears. He don't believe me half the time anyway."

Susan Gates was half-laughing, half-crying. "I don't know what to make of you, Jimmy Christmas," she said.

"Don't try," Jimmy told her cheerfully. "Here, doc, here's a beltful of cartridges. It'll help some. Wait! What's that Greer saying?"

They listened and heard Mike Greer's harsh voice. "Watch yourselves, men!" he was ordering. "They're tricky now, with that kid in there! Hold your cover! There's plenty of time!"

"Still keeping behind the shed," said Jimmy Christmas. "He ain't risking his skin unless he has to. Well, maybe he's smart. The others seem to think so, the way they work for him. Wonder what they'd do if Greer was gone?"

"They're like coyotes following a wolf to share in the killings," Susan Gates declared scornfully. "Greer pays them well. Without him, they'd be outlaws on the run. Men who've been afraid to do anything would help run them. I've heard it said. I know."

"So I figured," said Jimmy Christmas. "Greer's the trouble, an' without Greer there won't be any more trouble. He's gone far enough now so a killing won't be questioned. And he's out there behind cover where he can be found easy. Doc, bar this door quick and make your lead last as long as possible if you have to."

"What are you trying to do?"

"Get me a wolf while I can still run a little on a bum leg," said Jimmy Christmas. "Bill Daley'll understand if you have to tell him. Here's your door, doc!"

"Please don't—" Susan Gates began fearfully.

But Jimmy Christmas was already gone, like a phantom, like a shadow launching from the doorway. He was gone in a crouching, limping run toward the open shed. Each hand held a gun, cocked and ready. But both guns stayed silent even when a warning yell rang out down the draw.

"There's one of them outside!"

A gun opened up at the spot, and then another. Jimmy Christmas plunged on toward the shed without firing.

At the back corner of the shed Mike Greer bawled, "Over here! He's over here!"

Greer's gun lashed out, and the two guns Jimmy Christmas gripped opened up in a crashing crescendo of lead directed toward the red flashes.

Greer seemed to be alone. Standing there half-sheltered by the shed corner, he pumped shots at the shadowy figure plunging toward him.

Jimmy Christmas gasped as a bullet grazed his side, knocking him breathless with the shock as he passed the front corner of the shed.

Greer's gun went silent after that shot; and Greer wasn't at the back corner of the shed when Jimmy Christmas rounded it with cartridges still left in his guns. A dozen steps up the slope a staggering figure was trying to run.

"Stand an' take it, Greer!" Jimmy Christmas yelled.

Mike Greer stopped and turned. His gun licked red again. The lead slapped the shed beside Jimmy Christmas. Jimmy Christmas stood steady and opened fire with both guns.

Greer's leap carried him half the distance back down the slope. He landed in a heap, rolling over a small bush and starting stones to skittering down the slope.

Jimmy Christmas lifted his voice in a whoop. "Greer's dead! Who's next? I'm waiting here for you!"

The back wall of the shed was thick adobe. With his back to safety there, Jimmy Christmas feverishly thumbed fresh cartridges in a gun.

"Greer's dead!" he yelled again. "Clean-up's started on the Trampas range! Show yourselves! I'm comin' after the next man in a minute!"

Half a dozen steps away Mike Greer lay in a huddled heap. The uneasy crash of gunfire still seemed to linger on the silence. But that was all. The silence grew heavier as Jimmy Christmas reloaded the second gun.

Then beyond the ridge hoofs thudded faintly, and were quickly lost in the new quiet of the night.

Jimmy Christmas drew a long breath and put one gun in a holster. He went over to Mike Greer, made sure the man was dead and limped cautiously back toward Bar Tack Johnson's hut.

"It's Jimmy Christmas!" he called.

Doc Magruder unbarred the door and caught him as he lurched inside.

"The rest of them pulled out like I figured, doc," Jimmy gasped. "Better stop some of this blood leakin' from me. Mike Greer's done for. You two haven't got anything more to worry about . . . and I'll tell Bill Daley about it myself."

"I'll tell him," said Susan Gates in a queer choked voice. "He wouldn't believe you, Jimmy Christmas. Would you mind if I kissed you for all you've done for us?"

Jimmy Christmas chuckled weakly. "Now Bill Daley'll *know* I'm a liar."

THE END.

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GHOSTS OF THE

by C. K. Shaw

I.

Pete Johns was keeping his back to the wall and his hand near his gun, for a man who spent an evening in one of San Francisco's gambling houses without drinking or playing was regarded with suspicion, and suspicion ripened quickly in these zenith days of the gold rush. The adobe village of Yerba Buena that had lain lizardlike in the sand-hills was now a town of brush huts, green lumber, dirty flapping rags and terrible greed. This section along the bay known as Sydney town was one of the many tough districts.

Johns was watching his eighteen-year-old brother, Teel, slide money out upon a poker table. A beady-eyed gambler called the bet and Teel gulped down a drink of whiskey as he lost the big pot. That money was part of the amount the two brothers had planned to put into a stock ranch. They had made the long, slow trip around the Horn with the hopes of finding grassy, well-watered range land in California. But they had stepped off the boat into a gold stampede. In the bay, ships, deserted by their entire crews, rocked at their anchors like gray ghosts. Beyond the cove, the mud flats and sanddunes were alive with humanity. Blood flowed in the sprawling uneven streets. The crack of a gun was no more unusual than the braying of a jackass.

Teel Johns got up from the poker table, his splendid young body top heavy from liquor. He jerked his pockets wrong side out with a swagger. "When I make another stake, I'll see you again," he said to the gambler. His tone was a bit too loud.

The gambler nodded, but all the time, by means of a mirror, he was watching Pete Johns. Somebody slapped Teel on the back and said he was a good loser.

Stepping up to his brother, Pete said quietly: "Shall we go home, Teel?"

Pete was eight years older than Teel. Where the kid's brow was crowded by a line of black hair, Pete's was high, slightly sloping and topped by sorrel hair. They were both slim-waisted, long-legged men whose movements manifested strength.

GOLD STAMPEDE

Even though their bullets had his name upon them, the only way Pete Johns could fight those outlaw lobos was—join their pack!

The kid swung on Pete. "I lost!" he growled. "Like you said I would if I played here at Deeds'. But I'm not going with you and don't bother me again."

Pete moved back to the wall again. This was the worst Teel had ever shown his fangs. And the kid had fangs; Pete had never fooled himself about that. Even here at Deeds' men were not handling Teel Johns carelessly. If the kid had caught a crooked flip of the cards in that game just finished, he would have moved hell out and started a real rumpus. The gambler who had fleeced him was one of Deeds' best. The fact that he had been wasted on an eighteen-year-old kid proved that Sydney town knew what it was dealing with.

"I'll wait until you are ready to leave," was all Pete said to his brother.

The answer Teel started to give was drowned in a howl of wind as the door opened to admit a tall man who waved under the gale like a human cornstalk. He carried a black violin case close to his thin chest as carefully as a mother carries a baby. The wind from the bay moaned across the room, carrying a cloud of fog with it. The man had a tussle to close the door and was panting a little as he turned to the room.

"It's a brute of a night," he said in a peculiar, thin voice that carried across the room. He shifted the violin case. "How about giving you a tune for my supper?" he asked the bartender.

Beyond the barroom and gambling space was a room thick with tobacco smoke and the odors of frying meat and boiling coffee. The thin man glanced toward this room and sniffed. "I'll put a cup of coffee into my stomach and then give you a tune," he said.

The bartender continued to wipe at the bar. "You'll play the tune first, Slim," he said. "The folks will decide about the coffee."

That met with a loud roar of approval from the crowd.

The man looked longingly toward a chair as though his pipestem legs had used all their strength carrying him this far. But nobody invited him to sit down, so, opening the black case, he took out

his fiddle. Pete Johns kicked a chair toward him. As the stranger sat down, his glance wandered in Pete's direction, but the thin-lidded eyes did not focus. For a second Pete had the feeling of peering down and down into a pit until distance blurred what might lie at the bottom.

The fiddler's bony fingers lifted the violin as though it were a gem. There was no testing for tone. The notes that came forth might have been the wind howling across the flat to wrap about the building. They expressed what the player had meant when he said that it was a brute of a night.

Somebody hurled a glass that just missed the violinist and crashed against the wall. "We hear that damned wind and them waves all day and night," a voice shouted. "If we wanted to hear them more, we'd open the door!"

The fiddler smiled as though he had been complimented, but the music changed. It grew soft, like a tiger that walks on the padded part of its feet, drawing its claws inward to hush their rattle. Glasses that had lifted, were held untouched. The player closed his eyes, his face twitched. At last the music drained away, its strength dying. Slowly the crowd began to stir, realizing that only the howl of the wind was left.

"Do I get the coffee?" the thin man asked the bartender.

The crowd roared for the house to set up a meal with all the trimmings, but the man looked vacantly at the bartender. "Just coffee and beeksteak," he said, moving toward the chop-house section.

"He looks like a snake walkin' on its tail," somebody muttered.

"His head looks like some of them skulls I saw along the trail," added a miner.

Pete watched the man slowly eat his supper. He was tall from the waist up, towering like a pole above the table. His black coat was open, revealing a worn buckskin vest that sagged from a top button. He handled his knife and fork gracefully; it was when he was still that he appeared awkward. When he was finished, he rose and bowed his thanks to the room in general. Returning to the gambling hall he leaned across the bar and spoke to the bartender.

"A drink to pickle down that steak," he said. "A small one."

He sipped at the liquor, barely moistening his lips. "What is this Order of the Burnt Cross that is coming in for so much attention?" he asked suddenly in his thin, carrying voice.

The mechanical swipe of the bartender's cloth ceased. Tension rippled over the room. The fiddler sipped his liquor, his vacant glance flitting from face to face.

"Hasn't anyone heard of it?" he asked. "The Order of the Burnt Cross I think it's called."

Cory Deeds, owner of the gambling house, came forth from a corner where he had been sitting quietly. At his heels trailed a gunman. "Why do you come to my place to ask of the Order?" Deeds demanded sharply, trying to pin the stranger's vacant eyes to steadiness.

"Just looking for a spot to play for my supper," the violinist replied mildly. "I overheard a conversation an hour ago and some talk about a man, Bull Durango, who is going to wipe out this Burnt Cross Order." The tones were as vacant as the eyes. They were so empty that the words seemed almost without meaning.

The gunman stepped up beside Cory Deeds. "Take your squeaky music box and get them skinny legs to liftin' you out of here," he ordered.

The thin man seemed unawed by the gunman. "It sounded gory," he observed, an insane taper flashing in his eyes. "Earless corpses!" His laugh split weirdly. "Dead men without ears!"

The gunman grabbed him and hustled him from the room.

"He's loco!" Cory Deeds told the crowd. "Crazy as a bat!"

As the thin man ducked his head and vanished through the doorway into the night, a big miner in red shirt and heavy boots clumped into the room. "You got a dead man along your path, Deeds," he called. "Kicked into him as I come. Set me up a strong drink, Hock."

As the bartender set up the drink the gunman went out to investigate the corpse.

"I wish my neighbors would keep their blasted killin's off my path," growled Deeds. "It's bad for business."

Pete Johns left his position against the wall and approached his brother. "Let's go home, kid," he said.

Teel spun on him. He was tall enough to meet Pete's glance on a level. "Pete," he said flatly, "I'm not coming with you. We struck out to buy a cow ranch but we've run into gold! You can't change, but I can—and have. Gold is to be had; life is here to be lived. I'm not burying myself on a ranch."

"Then we'll go to the mines together," declared Pete. "I've been waiting in this room three days for you to come. If you don't want a cow ranch, kid, then the gold fields it will be."

An ugly smile flickered over Teel's face. "Good ol' brother act, huh? Giving up the thing you've always dreamed of! And all for the black sheep of the family. Pete, it just doesn't sink in with you that I'm tired of being guarded. I'm going mining, but not with a pick and shovel. I'm staying right here in town. I'm not going back in the hills to let my whiskers grow and to dig and sweat." He stopped, then went on, his words slurred: "If I

wasn't drunk, I'd not put it so plain. It's a good thing I'm drunk."

"Yes," agreed Peter. "Plain talk covers the ground faster. So you're staying here, in Sydney town likely, getting the gold from men who have sweat and dug for it? Fleecing the suckers."

"There's blatting for it!" Teel said defiantly.

The door flew open and the wind and fog poured in. Deeds' gunman was back dragging a form behind him. Curses were stringing from his lips.

"It's Beck!" he cried to Cory Deeds. Sam Beck was a silent partner in the gambling spot known as Deeds' Place.

Beck had been stabbed through the heart. That in itself was not enough to awe the crowd. Every pair of eyes in this room had looked upon sudden death many times. Even the murder of big men like Sam Beck didn't cause San Francisco to sit up for long. But there was something in this murder that chilled the spine. The dead man's ears were missing. They had been slashed from his head.

Cory Deeds was shaken. He stared at his gunman. "Get that fiddler back here!" he ordered. *"Get that loco fiddler!"*

The wind had drifted the fiddler into the nearest door. The gunman was not long in returning with him. The thin man arrived panting a bit, his violin carefully hugged to his thin chest. He looked about with wandering glance.

"Who wants me?" he asked. Then he saw the dead man and his skull-like face lighted. "No ears," he said. "That proves what I told you about the Order of the Burnt Cross. Bull Durango gets fifty dollars each from ten men for every pair of ears he fetches them." His crazy laugh trickled out. "Bull Durango will soon be rich."

Cory Deeds grabbed the man by the arm and hustled him toward a door opening to a small office. The fiddler offered no resistance, but he kept talking. He had happened to step in out of the storm, he said, and had heard men's voices. First it was down by the wharf he had been, then up near the Plaza. Perhaps his mind would never focus on the location; it was the missing ears that seemed to obsess his wild mind.

Men shuddered when the door closed away the fiddler's cackling laugh. The man was crazy, but part of his mind was still alive. There was no doubt he had heard the things he claimed, for he had gone on record before Sam Beck had been struck down.

Pete turned to his brother. "Kid, if you're set on casting your lot with these new friends"—his eyes swept the room—"then you are, and I won't try to stop you. But I want you to come with me to the room tonight."

Teel's lips pulled to a snarl, but they straightened a little as his glance stabbed back at the dead man on the floor. "Just this one night," he said sullenly. "If you promise there'll be no preaching."

"There'll be no preaching," his brother promised.

II.

Pete Johns unbuckled his single holster, laid it on the table, then removed his hat, coat and vest. Teel was sitting in the only chair in the room. He sat hunched forward, occasionally taking a drink from a bottle he kept standing at his feet. The kid had slumped down there as soon as he entered the room and refused all conversation.

Pete knew if he could get Teel off the bottle, he could talk to him. A few hours of sleep and a few cups of coffee in the morning would do the trick.

"Let's go to bed, kid," he suggested.

"Nobody is stopping you from hitting the hay," growled Teel. "I'm staying right here." He felt of the front of his vest, button by button. His fingers were clumsy, his brain numbed by drink, but several times already he had checked his vest to make certain it was buttoned.

Pete drew off his boots and lay down in his trousers and shirt. He had turned the lamp low and the smell of kerosene and whiskey was strong in the room. Teel was too dazed to note that the window was closed. Soon he would sprawl from the chair to the floor and sleep in spite of his determination to keep awake. Pete wondered if whatever was buttoned beneath his vest was part of Teel's reason for refusing to go to bed.

Suddenly Teel lunged up from his chair. "Damn cannibal!" he cried. "Cutting off ears!" The chair creaked as he dropped back. He took a long drink from his bottle, weaving as he set it back. It tipped over and the last of the whiskey trickled across the floor. The kid did not notice. His head sank nearer his doubled middle and he began to snore.

When Teel's hands fell limply to his sides and his body began to slide, Pete rose and took him by the shoulder, easing him to the floor without waking him. Opening the window he threw out the whiskey bottle. The noise did not rouse Teel who was lying on his back with one knee partly folded. Pete looked down at him. Tonight it was win or lose. This battle was not one to be dragged out. If Teel returned to Sydney town, he would return for good.

Pete kept looking at the tightly buttoned vest. Slowly he bent over and unbuttoned it. From an inner pocket he drew forth a wallet. Teel's heavy sleep sealed him to another world, but a little color was climbing to Pete's cheeks as he turned to the lamp with the wallet. He looked about as though he felt eyes upon him. Hesitantly, he turned back

to the sleeping youth. As he studied the puffed face and swollen eyes, his fingers clenched on the wallet. To save Teel, anything was fair—even sneaking.

Pete dumped the contents of the wallet on the table. Its treasures were meager. Only one thing counted, a small dark object that slid to the table and lay like a snake's head. It was an iron cross that had been heated and pounded to shape by hand. A black cross bearing a number and a few strange marks. Pete had never seen one before, but he knew he was gazing upon the token carried by the members of the Order of the Burnt Cross. He picked it up and holding it in his palm, walked to the bed and sat down.

Teel a member of the Order of the Burnt Cross! Pete had heard of the organization his first day in San Francisco. As the days rolled to weeks he had heard more, had even gained some firsthand information. The Order was a gang of men who killed and robbed in a town where killings and robberies were scarcely questioned. Huts were burned to the ground if they were suspected of containing treasure. It had been whispered to Pete in strictest confidence that the leader of the Order was a man named Joke Stole, but Pete had never seen Stole nor discovered if the information was correct.

The Order of the Burnt Cross was an organization of youths. It banded together beardless boys who had flocked to the town's sandy hills. It was a secret order, but again and again the same things were whispered of it. Older men were at its head, eagles and wolves that used the boys for the daring work. They drew in this army of young men by preaching to them that the Order was not a murder machine, but a great governing force that would eventually spread to every camp in the gold fields. Every great force, for good, they argued, first had to use severe methods. They picked their youths carefully, searching out the ones with a light of defeat beginning to burn in their eyes, and a grim smile twisting their lips.

Pete recalled all these things, nodding as he at last considered Teel. The kid had been skillfully robbed of his bank roll; then he had been material for the Order. The gray wolves in the background were shrewd men. Perhaps even the youths who killed and robbed for them, did not know their faces. It was a secret order that moved cautiously. Each member carried a small iron cross, heated and pounded to shape. The Burnt Cross. Every cross bore a number and it was said that each number had its own password. Thus did the wolves at the top guard against surprise.

Pete recalled Teel's half-drunken remarks in the gambling house in Sydney town. The kid had bragged that he was going to gather in gold without digging for it. Then the crazy fiddler had come with his wild talk of a hired killer, Bull Durango, who was matching himself against the Order. This killer had struck first at Deeds' gambling place. It would seem that Durango, gaining information that San Francisco had thought unattainable, had laid low one of the wolves that headed the Order.

Daylight came with a dirty grayishness. The fog was still thick but the wind was not so high. Pete rose, chilled, and closed the window. He shook Teel's shoulder and the kid groaned. Pete spoke to him and hoisted him to a sitting position. Sullenly Teel climbed to his feet.

"I've stayed all night," he growled. "The black sheep came home to big brother. Now it's time to get out!"

He was sober but in a black temper. Pete did not try to stop him from leaving, for Teel could be mean. He would be back soon enough when he missed the cross.

At the door Teel brought up sharply, feeling of his vest. Pete had returned the wallet to the pocket, but he had not rebuttoned the vest. The kid's hand slid inside to the wallet, then he stiffened. He turned, eyes blazing at Pete.

Pete stretched his arm forward, fingers doubled tight against his palm. "Is this what you're looking for?" he asked. He opened his hand and the black iron cross was in the palm.

Teel Johns had been ready to slash out, but the sight of that cross had a strange effect on him. He went colorless as putty and his tongue clicked. His mouth tightened as though a draw string had been pulled about his lips.

"So you brought me home to rob me?" he managed to ask. His voice was almost inaudible. It was as though there was no force left in the kid's body. "You don't know what you're monkeyin' with, Pete," he whispered.

"It's you who are monkeying with the Order of the Burnt Cross, Teel," Pete pointed out warningly.

Teel looked about and moved away from the door as though talking so close to it was dangerous. "*Whisper!*" he said. "You're just a plain damn fool! Don't do any more loud talking!"

Always before, Teel had let loose cyclonic roars when he was angry. Now his voice was terribly soft.

"Do you fear this Order to which you belong?" Pete asked. "Are you afraid of this band of killers?"

"*Take that back!*"

"Part of it, maybe. I can't be sure you're afraid."

"Take back all of it. The Order's aim is to save lives. To bring better conditions. To rule wisely."

"It's a band of killers that will come to the noose eventually. There is already a slight turning of the straw in this black tide. Honest men are talking of banding together for protection."

"There isn't room in San Francisco for a second organization. Pete, don't be blind! Don't listen to lies! The Order is big and safe and secret. No man outside the circle knows a single member of the Order!"

"Except Bull Durango," Pete said grimly.

Demoniacal lights flashed in Teel Johns' eyes. "By now Durango's body is in the bay! Hours ago, while you and I slept, vengeance was visited upon him!"

"Maybe so maybe not. But the fact remains that Durango sought out one of the top wolves of the Order. What has been done once will be done again."

"It will not be repeated. No man in San Francisco is allowed to live after he knows one of the members of the Order. It is secret and safe."

"Secret and safe," Pete repeated. "I've heard that's the master phrase. I've heard that you take oaths to your brothers to protect their backs. I should think, kid, that your honor would require that you put me out of the way—I know one of the members of the most secret Order."

Teel began to tremble. "Don't talk lightly, Pete." Hearing Teel plead made Pete more uneasy than if the kid had lashed out with his fists. "Don't ever let a whisper of what has passed here this morning leave your lips. You'd be mowed down like grass if you did! Don't spill out silly words, Pete; you're braying at the wind. The Order's power is like the waves washing up at the foot of Sydney town! It's like—"

"You've learned your lesson well," Pete said bitterly. "But don't preach any more of it to me."

"Give me the cross," Teel whispered.

"I'm keeping that. Listen! Tell the great killer of your Order that Pete Johns wants to see him. Blackie is the way he's known, I've heard. He strangles weaklings, leaves men in alleys stabbed in the back. Tell him to look me up in the light, if he has the courage. Tell him to come and get this little token I hold."

"Pete, give me that cross!"

"You've had your answer."

Teel's hand snapped to his holster. Pete had left his gun on the floor by the bed. Teel lifted his gun, the shake now gone from his hand, and looked at his brother across the gleaming barrel.

"I don't aim to kill you," he whispered. "Just crease you. I'm showing a yellow streak not to silence you for good—but I'll just crease you and get the cross."

The kid was sober and determined and had marshaled his drink-shocked nerves. He would shoot, aiming to crease the skull, but creasing was a nasty shot to miss on. Pete pointed that out.

"If you move, and cause me to shoot low, you'll be committing suicide," was Teel's answer.

Pete laughed. "So that's the way you alibi yourself out of a murder. You tell a man to hand over his gold; if he objects, he commits suicide."

"Don't move!" Teel whispered. The cross—or I shoot!"

Slowly Pete stretched his hand forward, the one holding the hammered iron cross. Relief flooded Teel's face and his gun sank a notch. Then Pete leaped. It was a dangerous thing to do, but the kid was suffering from hang-over nerves and his brain was dull. The split second when he could have pressed trigger and dropped his man, passed with only a startled twitch. Then he fired, but it was too late. Pete was on top of him, knocking his arm downward, jabbing him in the stomach with his knee.

Pete weaved back and brought up a blow to Teel's jaw. The kid was not taking this attack without fighting, but he was concerned most with recovering the gun Pete had knocked from his hand and not on a hand-to-hand battle. He jerked back and made an effort to swoop up the weapon. This left his jaw exposed again and Pete crashed in a blow that sent the kid lurching to his knees. Then, whipping up the fallen gun, Pete covered Teel as he climbed to his feet.

"If you want any more fist work," Pete said evenly, "I'll toss this gun on the bed and give you a real dressing down. I've seen in your eyes several times lately that you think you can trim me. Now would be a good time to decide that issue."

"You're fast as a bobcat." Teel's voice was sullen. "Pete, you'd be a leader in the Order. You'd work up to be one of the top men—"

"One of the wolves that hangs back with dripping jowls and sends kids in to do their murdering? Or did you mean one of the big men like the Black Killer?"

The kid's teeth gleamed. "I'm coming at you for that cross. Now you can try the trick shot. If it goes low, then it's suicide."

"Teel, stand back!"

"I'm coming."

Pete stepped away from him. "Does this cross mean so much to you, that you'd kill me for it? That you'd fight to your own death for it?"

"Yes!" Teel sucked in his breath. "But I didn't kill you; my trigger finger went dead on me. Tell you what, Pete: Give me back my gun and you buckle on yours. We'll see which is the best man."

Pete stood, and now strangely it was his muscles which seemed to be drained of life instead of those of his younger brother. "It means that much to

you," he said. He stretched forth his hand. "Then take it."

The kid snatched the cross, relief whistling through his nostrils. Pete handed him his gun and Teel began to shake again, now that the crisis was past.

"Don't ever breathe a word of this," Teel whispered. "If you do, you'll find my body washed up by the waves. I'm trusting to your honor. I'm breaking my pledge to the sacred brothers by—" His tongue clicked against the roof of his mouth.

"By not silencing me, now that I know one of the members of the sacred Order of the Burnt Cross. Sorry, Teel, I'll give you no promises. I'll treat this information as I see fit."

"Fool!" blazed Teel.

"And don't forget my message to the Black Killer." Pete stepped from the kid's path, smiling crookedly.

"Pete," Teel whispered in a last effort, "leave town. Not tonight, but now. Within the hour!"

"I've never run from a bunch of killers yet, kid."

Teel Johns reached for the door-knob. "You're a conceited fool," he said. "The power of the Order is like the strength of the tide. Any man that stands in its path is washed away. It guards its secrets as securely as the grave."

Pete still wore his one-sided smile. "You're forgetting about Bull Durango," he said.

III.

Pete felt cold as the kid's steps began to fade. At last they only whispered back, a soft *tap, tap, tap*. The chill spread over Pete Johns like a paralysis. Teel was walking out of his life. Turning to the bed, Pete sat down.

A long time passed before he rose and put on his coat and hat. Buckling on his gun, he left the room. The morning was chill and gray. Fog washed against his face like a thick drizzle of rain. Pete was surprised to see the town astir until it dawned on him that it was late. Time had slipped by while he had sat on the edge of the bed, grimly thinking and planning.

He had coffee in a restaurant and as he sat drinking the steaming liquid he caught the drift of several excited conversations. The town was on edge over a murder. The finding of a body on the beach or in an alley was not enough to rouse men from their brownish morning tastes. Pete knew, so this must be a special murder.

"Ears cut off close to his head!" somebody said, and Pete recalled Sam Beck. The man continued on the same subject. "I never knew before that ears was all that kept us from lookin' like billiard balls!" He slapped his thigh and laughed.

Most men were talking cautiously. The name of Bull Durango came in for attention. The Order of the Burnt Cross was mentioned in whispers. Pete's eyes grew scornful of these thick-shouldered miners who let the mere mention of a murder machine dry their lips. He finished his coffee and joined a group.

"I was at Deeds' Place when they brought Sam Beck in," he said. "I heard the crazy fiddler tell about Bull Durango. He gets fifty dollars each from ten different San Francisco men for every pair of Burnt Cross ears he collects."

"A thousand dollars a night," a miner observed. "Rich dirt."

"A thousand?" inquired Pete. "Was there a second murder?"

"Cory Deeds lost his ears, and right in his own stronghold."

Pete felt his flesh tighten. "Did they get Durango?"

"No more trace found of him than if he was the wind." The speaker shook his head. "San Francisco is in for a wave of killings like it's never dreamed of. Cory Deeds and Sam Beck in one night!"

"I don't know," Pete said, allowing his words to carry. "Bull Durango will start these Burnt Cross rats hunting their holes, and when they find those holes are not safe, they'll scatter like chaff."

The men about Pete began to drift away. There was no knowing whether the man standing next to you was a member of the Burnt Cross organization. Words like Pete Johns had uttered were dangerous even to hear.

Smiling, Pete spoke to the entire room. "Maybe there's a member of the great secret order of murderers present," he said. "If so, carry this message to your Black Killer. Tell him Pete Johns would like to see him, and since he travels like a snake, looks from a mask, and stabs in the back, tell him an alley will do." He walked from the restaurant leaving a dead silence behind him.

That evening Pete moved out of his hotel room. From now on he would do his sleeping days, and always in a different spot. Nights he would wait for the visit of the Black Killer. The Killer would come, for to leave Pete Johns alive would be to break the spell he had thrown over the minds of the people. Not once after the Black Killer had marked a victim had that man failed to die. Now a victim had openly appointed himself. The Killer must come, and if he would save his face, he must come before too many nights passed.

Pete ate supper at Mike Ryan's restaurant. Sitting with his back to the wall, he watched every man that entered the place. The waiter regarded him with mixed respect and pity.

"They're bettin' two to one that you won't see the sunrise in the mornin'," he whispered. "Mike hisself is offerin' a thousand against five hundred and is cryin' 'cause he ain't got no takers."

Mike Ryan was known in San Francisco as a smart gambler. His offering money on such a bet would send a shiver of conviction down many spines that the Black Killer was a cinch to win. Finishing his supper, Pete walked over to the desk in the corner where Mike Ryan conducted his business.

Pete stopped before the huge old desk and threw down some money. "There's five hundred," he said. "I hear you're putting a thousand against it that I won't see tomorrow's sunrise."

Talk in the restaurant became hushed. Pete Johns was now a man of importance in the town, just as a corpse plays the principal part at a funeral. Ryan rose, his fat stomach creased the thick desk.

"Thanks for the donation, Johns," he said.

"In the morning," Pete asked, "do you agree to hand me back that five hundred and a thousand of your own?"

The restaurant owner's eyes seemed to be swallowed by his broad face as he looked at Pete. His small mouth was like a buttonhole in a piece of canvas. Pete felt his hackles lift on a cold hunch. Ryan was, he recalled, always quick to jump at any chance to build up the invincibility of the Order of the Burnt Cross.

"Better keep this five hundred for a funeral, Johns," Ryan said in a loud, rolling voice. "The Black Killer ain't goin' to be stopped by you."

Pete leaned close to him. "You're showing yourself pretty interested in building up terror for the Order. Too much such interest might prove dangerous. Deeds was too anxious to squeeze information out of the crazy fiddler and Bull Durango got suspicious."

Ryan's face darkened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you'd look funny without ears—your face is so wide."

The restaurant man reached downward toward a drawer, but Pete laid his hand on his gun with such swiftness that Ryan paled.

"Better leave the hardware in its poke," Pete advised.

Ryan brought both hands to the surface. "You startled me," he said, forcing his tones down. "I'm as much against this unlawfulness in San Francisco as anybody, but one man can't buck the Order."

"Durango is doing a fair job. When I saw Sam Beck last night, I thought this new killer might be just a flash in the pan, but when he strung up Deeds' ears, too, my opinion of him soared."

"Johns, it ain't none of my business, but I'd say you better leave town for your own good. You've talked too loud; your luck won't hold."

"I'll be in town to collect the thousand," said Pete. "I wonder," he added, "if you'll be here to pay off?" He smiled from one corner of his mouth and walked from the restaurant.

The fog drifted away from town for a few hours during the middle of the day; then with early evening it settled back, spreading its mysterious gray blanket. Pete didn't do very much talking, but here and there he caught jokes about the bet Mike Ryan had made and he wondered if Bull Durango would be shrewd enough to investigate the restaurant owner.

Pete thought of Bull Durango when he could get his mind free of Teel. Who was he? Who

Like a ghost out of the wind and the fog, the grotesque old man stood in the doorway.

was hiring him? Did it mean that a real fight was on to break the hold of the Order?

Night closed down and Pete circled all pools of light. If he entered a building, he kept his back to the wall and treated all men with suspicion. There was no knowing which was a member of the Order. He gave no one a chance to shove a gun into him and force him into a favorable spot for a murder. That, perhaps, had been the way the Killer had often worked, using a brother member to bring his prey to him.

It was midnight when a cry went up that a brutal murder of two guards had been committed at an express station. A safe where miners' dust was stored had been robbed. Pete singled out a man he trusted to ask the details of the job. The man was a captain on a Sacramento River boat and openly against the Order.

The man stared fixedly at Pete for a second after his question. "Two guards killed," he said. "Three men done the job. One was caught." He kept staring. "Is this the first you've heard about it?"

"Yes."

"Then you'd better hit the trail for that jail house where the volunteer police took the man they caught. She's a trick contraption built up of the boards off old ships, and wouldn't stand off much of a mob. That feller they caught is your kid brother."

Pete had been prepared for that after the man had uttered his first few words. "Thanks," he said and turned in the direction of the jail.

The river-boat captain walked a few steps with him. "The town is het up," he said. "When I left the crowd, talk was hotter than usual." He cleared his throat. "You can't blame the men of San Francisco, Johns."

"No," Pete replied, "you can't blame them."

Pete found the crowd about the jail in an ugly mood. For some time now he had been hearing whispers of honest men banding together against crime. Tonight the whispers were swelling to low, grim threats. The principal banker of the town, Philip Nathan, was among the massed men and his cool, blunt words were carrying great weight. He was advocating the immediate organization of a committee to handle this latest crime and he called for action tonight, not next week.

Nathan stood straight, head high, words coming clear and unafraid. He was close enough to the jail so the lights outlined his high-nosed face and gleamed on his neat beard. The men surrounding him listened and nodded. Talk became less boisterous, but breathing quickened.

"There is no need of a trial," declared Nathan. "The man inside the jail was caught red-handed. We have caught such criminals before, but our regular police spirited them away before we could deal out punishment. Tonight our volunteer police stand ready to deliver this prisoner to us. Our sheriff realizes it is useless to go against the will of a justice committee. This criminal is helpless from his wounds, but did he consider the helplessness of the men he killed?"

"Hang him!" a man cried in a grim voice. "Tell the sheriff to deliver him to us."

"Let's take him before his friends spirit him away," said another.

"Good talk," Nathan said approvingly. "Good strong talk!"

Pete had pushed to the banker's side. "Nathan, the kid in yonder is just a tool! Killing him will do no good."

Nathan turned blue, icy eyes upon Pete, frowning as though trying to place him. "The prisoner is young, but one of the guards he blasted down was young also. An eye for an eye is a Bible law, one to hark back to in times such as these."

"The boy is a tool of the men at the top, Nathan!" insisted Pete. "Hold judgment on the lad for a few hours. Give me a chance to find the men who worked with him."

A growl of anger hummed in the throats of men who caught Pete's words. Philip Nathan leaned down to look into his face. "You are Pete Johns!" he cried in piercing tones that carried. "You are the prisoner's brother! I don't like your talk, Johns. I don't like it at all!"

"Here's the prisoner's brother!" went out through the crowd. "Trying to save him!"

"Where were you these last two hours?" Nathan asked Pete. "There were two men who escaped."

Fire seemed to spread through the crowd. "He doesn't offer an alibi," one man said. "Says he wasn't at any particular place."

Pete knew the uselessness of trying to quench this new fire that had flamed. He could not prove where he had been the past few hours. He had been hugging shadows and shunning men. He stared into the banker's hard eyes and spoke flatly.

"If my brother killed, which it looks like he did, he'll stand trial. But he isn't going to be taken out by a mob and hanged!"

Pete faded into the black shadows, then circled and slid up to the open door where Sheriff Dancing and his deputy stood on guard. The lawman was speaking to his man.

"We can't shoot into this mob, when it comes—not when it's headed by Philip Nathan." He hunched, shifted his weight. "The town might settle down if it got one good night's excitement under its belt."

Pete stepped close. "I want to see my brother," he said to the sheriff.

"No visitors allowed," snapped Dancing.

"Stand aside," Pete ordered in a harsh voice.

"Johns," the lawman said warningly, "you're takin' on some tall jobs lately. First you challenge the Killer and now you're settin' up to defy the law."

"*The law!* If you're the law, why haven't you gone after some of the men who order the crimes?" Pete jerked his thumb at the growing roar of the crowd. "There's the law. Give that mob time and it'll sweep over this town like a firebrand from hell. Men like Phil Nathan will clean up this town." Pete's hand swept to his holster and he kept both the sheriff and his deputy under his eye as he slid past them and into the deeper shadows just inside the door. The voice of the mob was growing louder and angrier and was beginning to move. It was coming toward the door.

"You have obeyed the order of the thieves and murderers in this town ever since you took office," Pete told the sheriff. "I hate your stripe, but tonight, just for this hour, you and I are going to stand together. Tonight, Dancing, you are going to be the law. You are going to stand off that crowd."

The low words cut under the mutterings of the mob. Sheriff Dancing wet his lips to make words come. "Johns, you're crazy. I can't stop them!"

"Then you'll die in line of duty. You've let Nathan understand that you will surrender the prisoner. Now you can step upon that box beside you and correct that impression. If that mob comes through this door, it will walk over the dead bodies of three men—you and me and your deputy."

"Johns, get back yonder and take the kid out the back way. I'll hold the mob as long as I can. There's a back passage—"

"Which is guarded. The instant I turned my back you'd shoot me down. Get up on that box and start talking." Pete jammed his gun into the sheriff with the words. The deputy he ordered to take a position beside his chief, facing the crowd with his hands at his sides.

"Tell them you'll stop them with bullets if they rush you," Pete commanded. "And make it convincing."

"Step aside, sheriff," commanded Philip Nathan, as the mob came to a halt. "We want the prisoner."

"Promise to deliver the prisoner to them for trial tomorrow," Pete prompted, for the sheriff was choking on his sputtering words. "Make your talk stick if you want to go on living."

Sheriff Dancing was facing the crowd and behind him in the shadow was Pete Johns. The lawman drew his gun and leveled it at the banker. "The boy in yonder is guilty," he admitted, "but this is a jail and I'm sworn to protect its prisoners. I'll turn him over to you tomorrow when the mob spirit has died down. I'll even help pull on the rope to hang him after he's had a fair trial. But now"—his voice rasped out over the crowd—"I'll shoot the first man to take a step closer. Pete Johns is here beside me. He's a dangerous gunman. He's got a right to demand that his brother have a fair trial. Philip Nathan, are you ready to call for these men about you to walk into the fire of two guns when you have my word that the prisoner will be here for you in the morning?"

The sheriff was doing well. He had had practice in such argument, for he had used it before and then failed to have the prisoner in his jail when the morning came. Philip Nathan remembered this and spoke of it. But the banker was reluctant to give an order for men to walk into certain death. Stepping back, he consulted with a friend.

"Let me down off this box!" the sheriff whispered to Pete. "They'll cut me down like a rat if they decide to rush us!"

"It's the duty of the sheriff to take a bold stand," replied Pete. "Besides, a sign of weakening would bring them at us."

Philip Nathan turned back to the sheriff. "Your selection of Pete Johns as a deputy is a suspicious move," he said.

"I had to grab any material at hand. If you have proof that Pete Johns was with his brother in this robbery, present it at the trial."

The banker was sternly silent. Men near to him awaited his decision wordlessly. Farther back, a few called for a hanging. These few were a safe distance from the hostile guns.

"We will disperse," the banker said. "But, gentlemen"—his words crackled—"be back at dawn and we will hold a trial! After night of deliberation, the sheriff can no longer call our gathering a mob!"

"I'll hand the prisoner over at dawn," the sheriff promised.

"Very well," answered Nathan. "But in case the boy's friends try to spirit him away, sheriff, I'll leave a guard about the jail to assist you in repelling them."

IV.

"Take me to my brother," Pete said to Sheriff Dancing after the crowd had melted into the fog.

Lamps had been put out when the mob had started gathering, and now the sheriff lighted a candle. Jerking his head toward the lamps on the wall, he said he'd feel better without strong lights. He walked ahead of Pete from the office to the hallway between the two cells. The jail was a small building, just the office and the two cells. Pete inspected each nest of shadow as he advanced. His gun was still in his hand, for he was not forgetting that the Black Killer was on his trail. The

sheriff paused at one of the cells and unlocked the door.

Pete felt a lump of pain in his throat as a groan came faintly from the corner. Teel was lying on a pile of old coats and torn blankets. The flicker of the candle showed the marble face of the boy and his bloodstained shoulders. His leg also was soaked in blood.

"One bullet wound," Pete said, "and the back of his head crushed."

"The two guards put up quite a fight," explained the sheriff.

"And the police said they found Teel beneath the window of a room some distance from the actual robbery. Don't see how he navigated after that head wound."

"He didn't," the sheriff snapped. "His friends was tryin' to pack him away with them. Then the police closed in and they had to leave him."

"Have your deputy bring water and bandages," Pete ordered.

The sheriff hesitated. "He's the same as dead. No use to—"

"Have water and bandages brought."

The sheriff tipped some of the wax from the candle on the floor and wedged the taper into it. "I'll fetch the bandages," he said.

Pete still held his gun and he stood in a corner back from the light. "I said have your deputy bring the stuff, Dancing. As long as you're in this cell with me, and this gun is on your heart, there isn't much danger of your giving your deputy the signal to fire from cover."

"But he's in the office, Johns. He can't see back here without showing himself in the door—"

"No use arguing. I'm taking no chances."

The sheriff called for the water and bandages and the deputy brought them. Staying in the corner, Pete ordered the sheriff to dress Teel's wounds. Pete's voice was hot and dry. He would like to have done this last thing for Teel himself, but putting down his gun was too dangerous.

There was not much left of the night. Pete and the sheriff sat on boxes in the cell and the only sound was an occasional groan from Teel on the ragged bed. Pete had emptied the sheriff's holster and, feeling more secure, had let down on the sharpness of his watch. Suddenly Teel's lips parted and a groan rattled strangely in his throat.

"He's gone," the sheriff said with relief. "It's better that way, Johns. It's near dawn and the mob would soon have been after him."

Pete reached down to feel for Teel's pulse. It was spurting up stronger than at any time during the vigil. The lad was dying, but it seemed he was going to rouse for a last moment. To have that moment alone with his brother, Pete decided to take a desperate chance. He rested Teel's hand back on his chest.

"He's gone," he said to the sheriff.

Outside a clamor suddenly set up. Guards, who had paced about the jail all night, called to friends. Dawn was beginning to break. The even clear voice of Philip Nathan sounded through the chill morning.

"Tell the sheriff to bring out the prisoner."

"Go tell him the boy is dead," Pete said to the sheriff. Now with Nathan and his crowd back, there was small danger of the sheriff turning on him, Pete Johns. Dancing would leave that job to the Black Killer.

Pete lifted Teel to a sitting position and spoke softly into his ear. "Teel, it's Pete. Kid, this is all for you. Tell me before you go what happened!"

The dying youth's eyes opened. There was the last glow of a departing soul in their depths. Pete repeated his demand. "Who struck you, Teel?"

"You were right," the kid whispered. "Cowards . . . snakes."

"Who struck the back of your head?"

"I couldn't keep up . . . my leg held me back. So they killed me, Pete. *Pete!*" Teel choked. In the dim light his eyes glittered faintly. He jerked up his arm as though to fend off a blow. "Blackie!" he whispered, his voice harsh with fear and loathing. "You'll know him, Pete . . . black, burning eyes. *You'll know him!*"

"I'll know him," Pete Johns said fiercely.

With a long shudder, Teel died. Pete rested him back on the dirty bed and stood a second, looking down at his face. Out front, the sheriff was shouting to the crowd that the kid was dead. His answer was an angry rumble, like when an animal loses its prey.

Pete called to the deputy to help him with Teel's body. Together they carried their burden through the front office and into the yard of the jail. A quietness settled over the crowd.

"Here is the prisoner," Pete said to Philip Nathan. "The sheriff and I sat with him during the night, hoping he'd talk. He didn't."

The banker's face was like a frozen lake. The deputy stepped aside and Pete glanced about for someone to aid him with Teel's body.

"May I have help in removing the body?" he asked of the men about. "I'll take him to the hills and bury him."

"The town has a system of ridding itself of the bodies of prisoners," Nathan said.

Pete met the icy eyes. San Francisco did have a formula for divesting itself of such burdens without the expense of a funeral. That formula was to dump bodies in the bay.

"He killed two men!" somebody cried at the back

of the crowd. "Feed the sidewinder to the fish!"

"Let the body lie, Johns," Nathan ordered.

Swiftly Pete placed his back to the wall. "He committed a crime, and he's paid with his life," he cried. "That's more than most murderers and thieves pay in San Francisco! If this kid's body goes into the bay, mine goes with it."

"And why not?" yelled a man.

"Yeah. They're both of a feather!" came a second shout.

Philip Nathan held up his hand. When this did not silence the heated voices he tried to speak. There was too much commotion for even his clear tones to carry. He stepped close to Pete.

"Take the body and bury it, Johns. Do it fast. You may be equally guilty of last night's crime, but we did not catch you. I can't hold this mob back if feeling climbs much higher, but I have no wish to see a man hanged when I'm not dead certain of his guilt. Geary, help Johns remove this body."

Reluctantly the man named Geary stepped forward. The mob was not united enough to make a move when the body of Teel Johns was carried away. It rumbled sullenly, but did not follow. At the livery stable, Geary dropped his part of the burden, brushed his hands and walked rapidly back toward town.

Pete rode into the brown hills to bury Teel. He dug a grave, wrapped the youth in his saddle blanket, placed his hat on his face, then set to the grim task of refilling the grave. When he finished, he piled some rocks at the head. Then, half leaning on the shovel, he stood looking across the freshly broken earth.

Eighteen years Teel's Book of Life had been opened. What a thin, scant record. There should have been many rich years added to it. Years when Teel rode over grass lands watching cattle graze. But now those days would never be recorded. The Order of the Burnt Cross has closed the Book—through the hand of its ace killer.

Pete laced the shovel to his saddle. Teel had called the killer Blackie. Even as the kid had died, he had seen those eyes. Black—glowing like a jungle cat's. Piece by piece, Pete fitted together the picture he had of the killer. A strong man who could strangle his victims. A swift-moving, cunning beast whose eyes burned from a black mask. A fiend who brought a shudder to the spine of even a dying man.

Pete looked back to the new grave. "I'll know him when I meet him, Teel," he said half aloud. "I'll keep on the trail of the men that put you where you are, kid. Rest easy on that."

With iron discipline, Pete lay down in a sheltered spot and slept. He had work ahead that called for steady nerves. That work would not begin until night, so he did not return to San Francisco until lights were swinging from the ceilings of gambling halls and alleys were black as rivers of pitch.

He called first at Mike Ryan's restaurant for food and the money he had earned on his bet. A hush fell over the place as he entered. Glancing toward the big desk, he saw that Mike Ryan was not there. He took a table where his back was to the wall and motioned for the waiter.

The fellow blinked as he approached. "Where you been all day?" he asked. "I thought— Everybody thought—"

Pete's mouth tipped upward at the right corner. "That the Black Killer had got me," he finished. "I hope Mike Ryan didn't figure that and spend my five hundred. I've come to collect. Tell Mike I'm here."

The waiter wiped his palms on his apron as though they were moist. "Bull Durango got Mike," he whispered. "In the alley back of the place here."

Pete felt thrills of excitement. "Durango gets around, doesn't he?"

"Ears off close to his head!" the waiter breathed. "Nice conversation to serve your patrons."

"Did you say steak?" the man asked dully. "I'll fetch it. None of us workin' here dreamed Mike belonged to the Order." He turned and went for the food.

Pete ate slowly, paid for his meal and left the restaurant. He carried with him the money he had won, for Mike Ryan had left it in an envelope in the drawer of the old desk. Just tossed it there, probably feeling sure it would be his by sunup.

Pete went from the restaurant to the Plaza, where he had learned a meeting was being held. Handbills had been scattered during the afternoon urging all men interested in joining a battle against crime, to come to this open meeting. Pete was not surprised to see that Philip Nathan was in charge.

The banker was speaking with ringing firmness, urging that drastic steps be taken by the citizens of San Francisco for their own protection.

"Let us hold our own trials," he cried. "And after such trials we will fix our own punishment. Let us immediately show to these criminals that we are not afraid of them. And that the justice we hand out is severe. A life for a life shall be our aim!"

Pete kept to thick shadows, but he caught whispers as men surged close to him. Hope was being lighted in the breasts of honest men. They were beginning to speak openly against the Order. They mentioned the grim killer, Bull Durango, who had dropped from the skies upon San Francisco, and in the name of justice, was littering the town with gruesome corpses.

Pete moved off, eyes alert, ears listening for a stealthy step at his back. His caution increased as he drew to the edge of Sydney town. He threaded his way toward Deeds' Place, the most celebrated gambling spot of the section. Pausing in its thick shadows, he listened carefully. There was not the usual life. Pete smiled inwardly. Since Bull Durango had swept off both the owners within twenty-four hours, there seemed to be a chilly atmosphere blowing over the place. Pete edged closer to the door, watching patiently the faces of the men entering and leaving. At last Banjo Gibbons came along.

Pete waited in the shadows. Banjo was with two friends and Pete dared not stop him. Banjo was considered one of Deeds' most dangerous guards, and many believed he was a member of the Burnt Cross Order. Pete waited until two miners came, then entered the gambling house with them. His hat was drawn low and he moved swiftly along the wall toward the shadows at the north end of the bar. He was not recognized.

This dimly lighted spot was where Banjo usually stood when he was on guard, and he was there now. Feeling someone at his side, the guard started to turn. Pete jabbed him in the back with a gun. They were standing too close together for patrons to notice any irregularity.

Banjo stood stiff as a post. His holster sagged with a heavy gun, but he made no move toward it. He was a squat-built man of unusual strength and his muddy-brown eyes protruded.

"You got me," he said from the corner of his mouth. "What do you want?"

"Take me to Joke Stole."

"You're crazy!"

"I'm not wasting time. Walk with me out of this room, and see that you keep between me and the crowd. Come on!"

Banjo walked to the door, opened it when he was commanded, and together he and Pete stepped into the night. Forcefully it came to Pete what a dumpy, powerful rock of a man the guard was, and what horrible eyes he had. But they were not black.

"What do you want of Stole?" asked Banjo.

"I'm making a deal with him. Lead off." Pete cocked his gun. "You may have signaled for help as you left that room, Banjo. If you did, you wrote your death ticket."

"I know you, Johns," the guard growled. "I ain't signalin' nobody to rush you while that gun's on my liver. Let that trigger down."

"Are you taking me to Joke Stole?"

"If I do, it'll be the last walk you'll ever take."

"If you don't, you've taken *your* last walk."

Pete shot forth a hand and whisked the guard's gun from his holster. Banjo growled angrily.

"I'll take you to Joke Stole," he snarled. "I figure Stole will be glad of your visit. He'll probably give you a special welcome."

From a gambling hall down the sprawling street came the wail of a fiddle. It was like the tune of the wind as it sped up the face of a cliff, then zoomed off across barren plains. Banjo Gibbons shuddered. Pete laughed a little.

"When you hear the music of that crazy fiddler," he said, "I suppose you think of Bull Durango. Durango is collecting himself a right sizable bunch of ears. I should think Joke Stole would have him stopped."

V.

Banjo's thick body was tense as he led Pete to the back door of a dark building near the water. There was no sign of life, but when the guard gave three sharp taps, the door opened. Beyond the dark room where the man who had opened the door stood, Pete saw a knife line of light. It was a two-room shack and there was a lamp burning in the room beyond.

"Who's that with you?" the man in the doorway growled.

Expertly Pete lifted the gun he had taken from Banjo and pressed it against the speaker's ribs. "Never mind," he said. "You and Banjo walk ahead of me to that door."

The two men obeyed. "Stole will kill both of us!" the guard of the shack whispered.

"Open the door," Pete commanded as he sharpened the pressure of both guns. "And don't either of you forget you're on the receiving end of any trouble that starts."

Banjo opened the door a crack. "Joke," he growled, "I've brought you some company. Don't start shootin'." He shoved the door wide.

Pete stepped into the lighted room, saw it was very small and that Joke Stole and two other men were seated at a table. Now with three more men entering, the room was very crowded.

"I've got two of your men speared like dead fish," Pete said. "Don't start a war, Stole, unless you can afford to lose these two guards. And with this much protection, I might get a couple of you fellows at the table before the fight was over."

Joke Stole rose slowly. His steel-gray eyes matched his hair and mustache, and his face was still and hard as stone. "What is your business here?" he asked in a level voice.

"You're head of the Order of the Burnt Cross." Pete's tone did not indicate that this was more or less a bluff on his part. "My brother joined you. Now I have come to join."

Stole's lids fanned downward. "You have come to join?" he asked politely. "You are withdrawing

the challenge that you sent out to—Blackie?"

"I wasn't after Blackie any more than you and all the rest, but I had to name somebody, so I named him. I wanted to get back at the Order of the Burnt Cross for separating my brother from me. Now the kid is gone where nothing will ever touch him again, and I want to get at the men that stood outside his cell when he was dying, and shouted to hang him!"

Pete kept his guns on the two men before him as he looked over their shoulders at Joke Stole. "Teel never recognized me," he said slowly, "but he heard those shouts! My voice couldn't reach him—but the cries for his life registered. His eyes opened just before he died and he tried to sit up." Pete's low voice paused. "Now I want to get at the men who tortured the kid to his last breath. I want to strike back at the crowd that claimed his body so they could throw it to the fish!"

Stole's face did not change. "How about the job where the kid was killed?" he asked. "You must hold that against the Order."

"He couldn't be sent on any job he didn't want to do," Pete replied. "And the two men with him tried to get him away. They dragged him as far as they could. The kid's ticket was written when he got that blow on the back of the head."

Joke Stole's breath quickened a little and he nodded. Pete thought he flashed a message to the redheaded man across from him at the table. "Let you two hostages go," Stole said to Pete, indicating Banjo and the guard. "Sit down with Beaver Red, Sandy and me and we'll talk."

Pete moved aside and the two men backed from the room. As the door banged shut, Pete covered the three at the table with his two guns. Beaver Red had a whiskered brutish face and his hands were at the edge of the table, ready to drop at a glance from Joke Stole. Sandy was a sullen-looking youth with white brows and lashes who appeared to be still in his teens.

"Start a play," Pete said quietly, "and I'll wipe this room as clean of life as the inside of a platter."

"If you're going to kill us," Stole said coolly, "get about it. Of course you'll die with us."

"Order Beaver to get his hands out on the table like a white man!"

"Oblige the gentleman, Beaver," Stole said. "I believe he is here to bargain—not fight."

Slowly Beaver Red slid his hands away from the edge of the table. Pete shoved the gun in his left hand beneath the band of his trousers, then he dropped the one in his right hand to its holster. He stood with thumbs hooked over his belt a second. Stole was right. If a fight started it would mean the death of all. And he had not come to kill Joke Stole tonight. He had come to work his way into the Order, to get the names of more than just Stole. He might have hunted down the Black Killer, but the wolves at the top could hire another butcher. He had to get the leaders of the pack, but to do that he must travel over a lot of thin ice. Carefully he drew out a chair and, sitting down, began to talk.

"The mob was at the jail this morning to hang Teel. They were furious when they found death had cheated them. I had to drag my brother's body part of the way by the shoulders because none of those men would soil their hands by touching him."

"I heard of that scene," Stole said. "There were cries for your neck also."

Pete leaned forward a little. "They made a mistake not to hang me. Stole, do you know that Phil Nathan is this moment organizing a vigilante committee? That he's down at the Plaza shouting his lungs out? That nine men of equal importance are standing with him and—"

"Nine?" The growl came from Beaver Red. He leaned across toward Joke Stole. "Nine, and Phil Nathan makes the tenth. Each of them tossin' in fifty dollars for each pair of ears Bull Durango fetches them!"

"Johns," Stole said, "you asked to join the Order. I had not anticipated such a request."

"Not join, maybe; just work with your men. Tight as things are getting in San Francisco, you can use an extra gun. I figure getting in with the Order is the quickest way to get at certain men." Pete was feeling his way inch by inch. Stole was not an easy man to fool.

"I could use your gun," the gray-haired leader admitted. "I could use a man of your ability and courage. Things *are* tight, Johns. I called Beaver and Sandy in tonight to give them a job I consider of great importance." He drummed on the table with long, thin fingers. "Johns, I may send you with Sandy. I believe it will be work to your liking."

Knowing it might be bait, Pete took hold of it gingerly. "Nobody can pick out my work for me, Stole."

"The job is to get the banker, Philip Nathan."

The statement was blood-curdling in its bluntness. Joke Stole said it with no tightening of the voice, no change of expression. Beaver Red was not disturbed, but the kid, Sandy, half rose from his chair. Then he sank back, his sullen face the color of lard.

"Phil Nathan!" Pete whispered. "Go ahead, Stole. What're the plans?"

"I haven't yet given them to Sandy and Beaver," Stole said, and it seemed to Pete a little of his suspicion was falling away.

Sandy spoke for the first time. "Nathan the banker?" he asked. "You want me and Beaver to—get him?"

Pete Johns sensed hidden dangers in that room as he faced the man he suspected of being the Burnt Cross leader.

Joke Stole did not answer with a direct statement. Instead, his soft tongue slid into paths that it seemed to travel easily. Pete knew that Stole had made many such arguments as he was now making.

"I know how you feel, Sandy," Stole said. "Beaver knows, all the brothers know. Your father was murdered and robbed because he would not give up his claim. I have promised you that you shall get back at these murderers. I have investigated, Sandy; I have found that the men who did the actual killing of your father were hired by men higher up. Men of money who wanted your father's claim. *Bankers!*"

Sandy rose and leaned heavily on the table. His pale-lidded eyes gleamed with hate. "You mean Phil Nathan?" he asked.

"Yes."

Pete watched Joke play upon the boy as a musician touches the strings of a harp. Gently until he was certain of his ground, then swiftly and deeply he sent his words. "I had called Beaver here with you, thinking to send you together, for I don't send my boys out alone, but now I have changed my mind." He turned to Pete. "I have another spot where I can use Beaver. Will you go with Sandy to Nathan's home?"

It had all been neatly done. Pete wondered if a similar argument had been used to start Teel off on last night's job. Looking across the table, he met Sandy's burning eyes. The boy was quivering like a horse hopped up for a race. Pete turned his glance back to Stole.

"I guess the kid will do to take along," he said. "When do we start?"

Directions were simple. A knife was to be used, because a knife made no noise. Sandy was to do the actual work. Pete was to be ready to fight off any outside trouble.

"Johns is a good man," Stole said to the youth. "There shouldn't be any slip." He rose with the air of a busy man who must hurry on to more important things.

Pete rose, laughing a little. "If we do this job well, Sandy," he said, "we might get in on some really big fish."

Stole's eyes narrowed. "Meaning whom?"

"Bull Durango. It's about time he was stopped. Now that he may be whetting his knife for my ears, I'm concerned about his disposal."

"He will be taken care of before the sun rises," Joke Stole said stolidly.

"It's about time!" Beaver growled.

Stole spun on him. "Maybe you think you could bring him in?"

In the flaming exchange of words, Pete saw how great was the storm blown up by Durango. Even the iron-nerved Stole was feeling the pressure.

The moment of leaving the building Pete knew would be the real test of how thoroughly he had fooled Joke Stole. Would Banjo and the guard

be waiting to blast him down? Would Beaver and Sandy leap at him? They walked from the house into the night, and Pete relaxed. No guns blasted from the clumps of shadows. Evidently Joke Stole was satisfied for the time being. Pete stepped quietly along, listening to the last short words of warning. A cold elation gripped him. He had made certain of one thing: Joke Stole was the head of the Order. And soon Pete would contact the Black Killer.

VI.

Pete and Sandy moved softly through the foggy night. Suddenly the kid, who had thus far persistently refused conversation, spoke. "I'm glad it's you with me 'stead of Beaver," he said. "I knew Teel. Him and me was friends. An' I liked the way you talked back at the shack about the men that was howlin' for Teel's neck."

They paused at a branch in the trail leading to the banker's home. Ahead, the house loomed black and silent. It was at this point that Joke Stole had planned for them to separate. They were to circle the place for guards, then meet beneath the front window.

"We're goin' to keep together, Johns," the kid said. As the man who was to wield the death weapon, he automatically stepped into leadership.

"Stole's idea of circling the house before we approached seemed good to me," Pete declared. He had counted on getting away from Sandy this way and by some means rousing the banker. If a stir should break out inside the house, Sandy and Pete would be forced to withdraw.

"We're stickin' together," Sandy said flatly. "If anybody comes at us collectin' ears, we'll handle him together."

The lad's nerves were jumpy. It was clear that murder was not his regular line. He would probably have faced a toe-to-toe fight with courage, but sneaking up with a knife in hand was worrying him.

"Durango couldn't know of this job," Pete whispered. "Nobody but the four of us in the shack knows."

"Bull Durango knows a lot of things he's not supposed to!"

Pete caught Sandy by the arm. "You mean Durango might be an inside man?"

"Leggo my arm! Don't ever grab a man's gun arm!" Sandy stepped aside. "I ain't sayin' nothin' because I don't know nothin', but Bill Durango is sure collectin' a prize string of ears. Even Stole is gettin' nervous, and Beaver watches his shadow like it was goin' to knife him."

"I guess either of us could handle Durango if we met him," Pete said. He could not be too urgent, but he had planned on having a few minutes away from the kid.

"Other men have made light of Durango," retorted Sandy. "Beck, Deeds, Mike Ryan. I don't reckon they're laughin' very hearty down in hell."

"Maybe we had better stick together," Pete said. He knew it was not all fear of Durango that was bothering the kid. Sandy was afraid to be alone with thoughts of the murder he was about to do.

The house was a large one for this early day in San Francisco. It had perhaps six rooms, and there were sleeping quarters on the top floor. Sandy whispered that it would be their luck to find Nathan on the second floor. They approached a front window, because it was the only one that had shrubs growing close. The night was black and the fog weaving in moist waves. There was little danger of discovery unless a guard had been stationed. That might easily be the case after the speech Philip Nathan had delivered at the Plaza.

A sound came from the brush and sand stretching away from the house to the east. Pete and Sandy stood quietly against the wall. The noise from town came faintly to their ears.

"It must have been a dog," Sandy whispered.

"It must have been," agreed Pete.

"I keep thinkin' of Bull Durango."

Pete touched the kid lightly. "So you knew Teel, Sandy? Let's shake, and kind of figure from now on we'll stick together. Both of us could stand a little company."

Pete waited, his hand extended. You could not see in the thick blackness, but the kid had felt Pete's movement, for he had stiffened back against the building. It was a full second before a single word exploded from his lips.

"No!"

Pete let the echoes die, then whispered. "Sorry to have made the offer. However, just for tonight we might pool our efforts, seeing we have a common goal."

"No. Let's get at the job!"

They found the window unlocked and it slid up with a soft, grating sound. Sandy ordered Pete to enter first. Quietly Pete slid a leg over the sill. His foot touched a chair placed as though someone had been sitting there gazing out the window as darkness fell. Silently he moved it aside. He had to arouse Nathan, but it must be in a manner not to excite the suspicions of Sandy. He felt his way along the wall. If he could find a small object on a table, the could hurl it up the stairs when they found the stairway.

"Johns!" came the kid's edged whisper.

Pete slid back to him and spoke close to his ear. "Don't speak my name again! If a guard heard you, I'd be the first guest at one of these noose parties the town is planning."

"I felt for you and you was gone," the kid whispered back. "What was you doin'?" There was sharp mistrust in his voice. It came to Pete that Joke Stole had probably warned Sandy to watch his companion for any false move.

"I was looking for a door out of this room. There's one to the right."

They passed from what was evidently a front room to a small hall from which an open stairway led to the second floor. Across the square of hall lay another room, and in the dead stillness came the regular breathing of a sleeping man.

"It's Nathan!" Sandy clutched Pete's arm. "He wouldn't be lettin' the boy that keeps his house sleep in the front bedroom."

"And the door's open," Pete whispered back. He was standing by the stairway, and the instant Sandy moved toward the bedroom would be the second to hurl an object up the stairs. Pete thought of using his gun, but that would leave him unarmed, for he had returned Banjo's weapon to Joke Stole. There was his jackknife, he could use that.

"Keep close to me!" Sandy's breath burned Pete's cheek as he whispered.

"Right," Pete replied. He moved close, but not near enough so the kid could feel his body movement. He hurled the knife up the stairs, and was brushing against Sandy when it landed. It snapped upon the bare floor and skidded. As Sandy started backward, Pete strained ahead. They came together and the kid's feet made a shuffling sound. Beyond the open door a bed squeaked.

Sandy's moment of startled inaction was gone in a flash and he dived for the open door. It was a foolish move that only a desperate kid would have made. He was lunging to drive in his knife before Nathan could realize what was happening.

The room shuddered to the roar of a gun. A man threw himself to the floor and thus gained the protection of the bed. Rapidly he triggered with a general aim toward the door. A bullet caught Sandy before he was more than a step inside the room. He sagged back and Pete drew him to the shelter of the hall.

Shouts came from the second floor and at least two men raced for the head of the stairway. They poured lead down upon the small square hall where Pete was struggling to get Sandy through to the front room and the window they had left open. Pete managed to get the kid through the doorway, but both from the stairs and the bedroom, pursuit flared. Jerking his gun, Pete snapped out three careful shots at the advancing foe.

The man in the bedroom leaped back from the doorway, and there was a scurry of retreat on the stairs. Sandy twisted about and got his gun free from leather. Its roar added to the confusion, but the kid was wobbling so that Pete knew there was small chance of a bullet finding a mark. Under cover of the beating echoes, Pete got Sandy to the window and helped him to the outside. He was lifting him to his feet to test how badly he was injured, when the cutting tones of Philip Nathan stabbed through the house.

"Get outside and circle the house, men! There are two of them and one is wounded!"

A bullet had torn through the fleshy part of Sandy's leg and he was bleeding badly. He could move slowly by leaning on Pete's shoulder. Men were racing within the house and a door banged at the back. Lifting the kid into his arms, Pete ran as silently and swiftly as possible toward a half-tent, half-lumber house he had noticed as he had passed the banker's home a few days earlier. He made this shelter without detection. Bracing Sandy against a pile of driftwood piled on the dirt floor, he began to reload both their guns.

He placed Sandy's gun in his hand. The clear tones of Philip Nathan were floating over the yard.

"Beat the brush toward the beach," the banker ordered. "One is wounded and they'll have to move slow."

"You can't travel fast enough to make a getaway," Pete whispered to the lad. "I can't pack you and fight them off, too. They'll only beat that brush toward the beach so long, then they'll begin searching closer in. I'll slip out and lead them toward Sydney town; then I'll come back for you."

"I don't blame you for leavin'," the kid replied. "Every man saves his own bacon. You've done enough by gettin' me out of the house."

Pete laid a hand on Sandy's shoulder. "I'm not deserting you, kid. I'm going to do as I say, then I'll come back."

The kid's laugh was like a lid dancing on a boiling kettle. It was obvious he did not believe Pete. "Get goin'," he whispered. "I'll give them all but the last bullet when they find me. That one will be for me. I never did think I'd look good in a hemp necktie."

"Sandy," Pete said, "there wasn't anything I could do for my brother as he died on that pile of rags in the jail. Now, if I can do something for you, it'll be almost like I was helping Teel." He moved toward the door. "Sit tight; I'll come back."

"Pete!" the kid spoke his first name sharply. "If you once get free, don't stick your head back into this noose! Keep goin'! That's what I'd do if I was in your place!"

Pete slid out of the door and faded into the darkness and fog. The banker's house was not so many blocks from the Plaza. You could hear the bursts of noise from the gambling houses lining the big open square, and see the glow of lights through the soupy fog. The shots at a home back on the sand

lots had not disturbed life around the Plaza. A flurry of shots were the regular order of every night.

Making a wide circle, Pete came in between his searchers and Sydney town. He crept up until he could hear their low words. They were beginning to growl that their prey had escaped. They began to doubt that one had been wounded as severely as Nathan had thought, but the banker replied with assurance.

"There was a lot of blood in the hall. They must be lying behind some of these sanddunes."

"Then we'll trap them fast enough when the other boys get here," was the response.

So they had sent for help. Perhaps the volunteer police. Pete made ready to give them proof that they were on the right trail. He wanted that proof to be strong enough to draw any reinforcements that might arrive. He waited until a man was almost upon him and then he fired. A cry of surprise rose, was quickly hushed, and the fellow went down upon the sand.

Pete pressed his lips tight. He had shot down one of San Francisco's few honest men. Before the night was over, more blood would flow. He had expected to speak openly with these men and make them see he stood at their side. But now there was that slim youth sitting up yonder with his back braced against the driftwood. These men would never believe that Sandy was a tool the same as Teel had been.

It was not Nathan who had been injured. The banker shouted a word of courage to the fallen man and urged his other companion to close in with him on the criminals. Pete exchanged two more shots with them, then settled to the business of circling back to Sandy. Nathan and his friend were moving very cautiously, and not very expertly. Pete caught the movement of their bodies against the sand several times as he worked his way past them and back toward the house.

Reinforcements began to arrive. Pete heard two new voices and then others. Nathan directed their efforts rapidly. "Comb every inch of the sand!" cried the banker. "If you see a stir, shoot to kill. It was only Providence that just now saved Fred Evens from a bullet in the heart. The murderer shot too low."

As Pete neared the tent and brush house where he had left Sandy, he realized that the excitement of the chase had at last filtered down to the Plaza. A few drunks were arriving, loudly proclaiming their desire to help pull on the rope of any murderer who had tried to kill Phil Nathan.

Suddenly the sand lots seemed alive with moving bodies. The real search was down toward the beach where Nathan was directing all efforts, but the excitement seekers that had come up from town were mostly milling about the house.

"We'll hang them when we catch them!" somebody shouted.

That cry took like a match touched to hay. Many of the things Philip Nathan had said at the Plaza swept back to men's minds. The town had already stood too much. It was time for honest men to take a hand. Time for San Francisco to dish up its own justice—and from the end of a rope.

Pete moved cautiously. Cries for a hanging often went up, but tonight it was a different crowd. The straw had been turning weakly against the strong tide of crime until now, suddenly, it gathered strength. There was a feeling that the time was ripe, Pete felt this as he worked up to the door of the house where he had left Sandy.

He whispered the kid's name, then crawled inside. Sandy was there, his voice a little stronger. He had been listening to the bloodthirsty shouts of the men.

"Pete," he said, "I can't make it away—very far. You hit out and I'll follow. You keep goin'."

Pete picked him up in his arms. Sandy was not heavy like Teel. The kid was slight, not more than one hundred and twenty pounds. To Pete the slim body felt like a bundle of tense wires.

"It's suicide for you!" Sandy whispered.

As if to give backing to his words, the clear voice of Philip Nathan floated over the scene. "The man we had cornered down yonder got away. He could not have taken a wounded companion with him. Search every spot on the grounds for that wounded man. And don't kill him—I want him to talk."

"Put me down!" the kid whispered. "I'll follow as far as I can!"

"Sandy, I never yet deserted a pal that I started out to side. I'll try and make it through. If we're spotted, we'll fight it out together."

Lights were beginning to flare, lanterns to bob. Pete kept the shack between them and the house as long as he could. He headed straight for the Plaza, because the searchers would least expect him to make for the town and more light. But Pete knew that for every lighted spot, there were a dozen pits of shadows. Alleys twisted like snakes, crawling by doors that had opened and closed to more than one hunted man.

"Why do you head for town?" Sandy whispered sharply.

"Figure to locate a celler where the light of day won't shine in. If we made for the hills, they'd find us, come morning."

A howl went up from the tent house they had left. "There's blood on the ground here! They must be headin' for town! After them!"

Pete began to run. The crowd behind him drowned any noise he made, but it was going to be

only a question of moments before the leaders would be near enough to see him. He kept on until a roar went up behind him and a bullet sped wildly by his head. Then placing Sandy on the ground, he drew his gun.

"It isn't far," he said over his shoulder. "Crawl as fast as you can. I'll stick here and dish up some lead to delay them. Make for the first alley and I'll be with you."

"Pete, go on and leave me!"

"Dry up and start crawling."

Sandy clutched his arm. "Pete! Listen!" The words throbbed as though they kept time to the lad's heart. "Joke Stole told me to kill you if you got wounded on the job tonight. Kill you so's you wouldn't be left alive to talk. *I was goin' to do it! I promised Stole I would! Now will you go?*"

"Sandy, that's what they did to Teel, killed him so he wouldn't be alive to talk. The Black Killer crushed the back of his head. Teel lived to tell me."

"You're lyin'! The brothers wouldn't kill one of their own! Pete, you're lyin'!"

"Would I waste time on lying with that mob crawling down on me? Get going. You and I have to get through this alive and avenge Teel and all the others that Joke Stole and the Black Killer have destroyed."

The kid began to crawl away. "I'll make it," came faintly back. "Follow me into the alley back of the Diamond."

Pete was sure Sandy would not faint. The kid would grit his teeth doggedly and keep moving.

The crowd out front had drawn down more support and surged closer. Pete snapped fresh loads and fired into a flash. A shrill wail answered.

VII.

Pete Johns zigzagged through a spot of light into an alley. Someone in the mob, which was now swelled by the town crowd, fired at him. A shout went up that the prey was again sighted, but the leaders held back from rushing the narrow-mouthed, black street. They had learned respect from the gun that bit back at them.

The Diamond, a famous night spot of the Plaza, rose blackly beside Pete. He felt his way along the wall, stumbling and fighting back the dizziness that was growing in his head. At last he came to the corner of the building, and to the small space that separated it from its neighbor.

Sandy was standing there, clutching the wall for support. "Pete," he whispered. "You was slow."

"A bullet ripped me in the ribs, Sandy. If you got friends here, get to them. I'll make a stand here. I feel like you do about hemp neckties. Never thought I'd like the feel of one, either."

A step came from down the narrow space between the two buildings. Sandy gave three sharp knocks on the wall. The steps halted and a voice asked who it was.

"Me—Sandy. I'm goin' inside. I'm takin' this man with me."

Sandy hobbled along, supporting himself against the building. The man who had stopped them had tried to question the kid, but Sandy had snarled that the mob now breaking into the alley was after him. The man seemed uncertain, but the howls of the mob decided him. He assisted Sandy and snapped at Pete to hurry.

Midway down the pitch-black space, Sandy rapped twice, three times and then twice again on the wall of the Diamond gambling house. An opening appeared as though a panel had been drawn aside. There was no feeling of light and yet there was not complete darkness. Pete thought it was like looking into a star-lit room. They went down some steps as though to a cellar, and Pete steadied Sandy to keep him from falling. Someone followed them, perhaps the man who had worked the panel. There was a closeness to the air that suggested the space in which they stood was small, like a closet.

Sandy began to talk to the man who had followed them. He spoke of the night's job and its failure. A thick, harsh whisper interrupted him.

"Who's this with you?"

"Pete Johns. He's wounded and he—"

"You brought a stranger to the Sanctum?"

Pete felt Sandy stiffen against the man's anger. "I'll explain to Stole!" the kid said.

"Explain! Explain bringin' a stranger *here!*"

Pete caught something familiar in the voice, but it was hard to tell in a whisper. The man was standing beside them. Suddenly he gave a command:

"Proceed, Brother Sandy!"

His voice had surged to a low undertone and Pete recognized him. It was Banjo. Sandy dragged his wounded leg ahead, still clutching at Pete. Pete's free hand was on his gun, for he knew now that it would have been better to have met the mob in the alley. Dying in the open was better than this. He tried to draw his gun as he felt Banjo move, but Sandy lurched just them and threw him off balance. A club crashed against the back of his head. He went down with the sound of a great booming in his ears.

Dimly Pete could hear a voice cry out. At first he thought the voice was a knife; it was so thin. Then the great roar drained away and he began to feel pain. He realized now that the voice belonged to Sandy. The kid was threatening Banjo with his gun. Banjo was growling and blustering. Pete's hand was sliding toward his holster when a voice

from farther away cut in between the two men.

"What's wrong here?" It was Joke Stole who asked the question.

Sandy told hurriedly of what had happened. "The mob was on our heels!" he finished.

"Come with me," commanded Stole.

"Banjo will kill Johns if I leave him!"

There was a sharp silence, then Stole spoke. "Drag Johns into the closet adjoining the Sanctum," he commanded Banjo.

Pete felt his collar roughly grabbed and he was hauled down the narrow hall. He could see by the light from the room Stole had left that it was a hall. The closet Stole had mentioned was a small square room that served as a guard to the real Sanctum. Banjo went growling back to guard the panel, and Stole helped Sandy into the lighted room.

Pete lay where he had been slumped down, giving no sign that he was conscious. He could look through a crack to the space beyond and see that it was a slant-ceilinged basement room, scantily furnished. He had heard whispers that there was a Sanctum where the heads of the Order held special meetings. It was supposed that the Sanctum was in Sydney town.

Beaver Red was in the room with Stole, and his flat-nosed face was marked with anger. "So you bungled the Nathan job!" he snarled. "And then you fetched a mob right to the door of the Sanctum! And you brought that rat of a Johns with you!"

Beaver strode to the outer closet where Pete lay and looked down at him. Stooping over, he emptied Pete's holster, then felt him for a knife.

"Too bad Banjo didn't finish him," he growled, returning to the room.

Sandy had slid to a chair beside the table and was telling Joke Stole about the job at Philip Nathan's house. "I was goin' to kill him like you told me, Stole—to protect the rest of the brothers—but it wasn't him that was wounded. It was me! And he packed me out of the house. He stood off the mob 'til he got that bullet in the side."

"You were standing at the opening leading to the panel when you first knew Johns was wounded," Stole said coldly. "You then disobeyed orders. You didn't kill him; you brought him here."

"But, Stole, he'd saved my life!"

"And because of that, you endanger the lives of all the members of the Order. Banjo did not question his duty. *He* acted!"

Sandy's head fell forward for a moment. When he lifted his face it was more than chalky from loss of blood, it was like the face of a corpse. "I failed!" he whispered. "I thought of my own selfish gratitude. I forgot the brothers!"

From a corner of the room that Pete had not been able to see stepped a man with long, powerful arms. His thick shoulders were hung with a loose-fitting black coat. His eyes were deep-set, staring and black. From beneath his low, still lids, Pete watched this man. Watched his eyes. He was rumbling at Sandy and his teeth flashed white and bare as his lips curled back. It was his eyes Pete watched, his black, burning eyes. They were phosphorescent. Pete knew they would gleam in the dark like an animal's. This was Blackie or, as San Francisco had named him, the Black Killer. Pete was sure of it.

"I'll take care of the job the kid should have done," the big man said to Stole.

Sandy pushed himself up from his chair. "Give me a chance to wipe out part of my failure tonight. I brought danger to the sacred brothers by bringing Johns here, now let me be the one to . . . silence him! Stole, give me a chance to clean my slate."

"You've already bungled enough jobs for one night!" the big man said. "Besides, this Pete Johns has asked personally to see me." He laughed.

Joke Stole stopped him as he took a step toward the anteroom where Pete lay. "Maybe this *is* Sandy's job," he said, his eyes sending a message to the big man. "If we let him clean his slate, he might yet be a good man to the Order."

From over their heads, where the patrons of the Diamond were having their night's entertainment, came the wail of a violin. The shouts of the miners had been dim and far away, but now this weird music crept through the cracks and seemed to be in the very room.

The big man doubled his fists. "That crazy fiddler again! I told the Diamond to keep him out. Everywhere I go I hear him!"

"No other noise from the Diamond ever come down here as strong as that," Beaver Red growled. "That fiddle is as crazy as its owner."

"We might place Johns' body where the mob would find it," Joke Stole said as though he had not heard the music. "They would think their bullets had done the job, and Nathan would rest easy, thinking he had gotten his enemy. Call Banjo, Beaver."

Beaver Red passed through the little room where Pete lay and out into the dark hall beyond. Pete heard him call in a grating whisper. Banjo did not answer. Beaver's feet clumped down the hall toward the panel, then he cursed. Something had startled him so much the oath was almost full-voiced. Joke Stole walked to the anteroom.

"What is it, Beaver?"

The guard was dragging something as he came down the hall and back to the light. It was Banjo's body. Beaver's breath let loose in a rush as he pulled the dead man into the small outer room and let him fall. Stole and Blackie were there now, and for a second not one of the trio moved. Pete

could see that the dead man's ears were gone.

"Inside the Sanctum!" Beaver whispered.

Breathing in the small space sounded loud and awed. Bull Durango had struck at the very heart of the Order. Like the music of the crazy fiddler, he had pierced the very walls. Stole stood with his long fingers clenched about the butt of his gun. From beneath his low lids, Pete saw terror freezing the men. In Stole it showed in a higher glint to his steely eyes. In the Black Killer, it was a rushing of breath through his great chest. In Beaver Red, it was twitching lips.

Suddenly Stole bent forward.

"He's still alive!"

It was true. Banjo was not yet dead. They dragged him into the large room and Stole set to work to revive him. He ordered the big man to guard the panel.

"Take a light and search the hall to make certain Durango has gone," he said.

They forgot Pete as they worked over Banjo. Moving his head slightly, Pete tried to locate a gun. Pain stabbed through the top of his skull, but he knew he could rise. His gun lay on the table, an impossible distance away.

"Banjo!" Stole cried. "Speak!"

The command seemed to reach the dying man. His groans ran together as though they had begun as words.

Stole snatched Banjo to a sitting position. His bloody head was rolling. It could only be a matter of seconds until he died and still his mumblings carried no meaning. Then suddenly, like a knife ripping through canvas, Banjo talked.

"Bull Durango! Gettin' rich off our ears!" He laughed wildly, and fell back.

"He's dead!" Beaver cried.

Joke Stole shook Banjo then. To Pete, the act was like a blow in the stomach. Banjo was beyond understanding, but to see a dying man shaken like a dog, was sickening.

"Who stabbed you?" Stole beat at him. "Who is Bull Durango?"

Banjo's body rolled, his eyes opened. *"Listen!"* he cried. The music of a violin was coming from the floor above. "That's Durango! *The crazy fiddler . . . he's Durango!"*

Banjo died as he uttered the words. Stole released him and the body fell to the floor with a plunk.

"The fiddler," Joke Stole whispered.

"Banjo was crazy!" Beaver Red said thickly. "That fiddler can't stand up against a gust of wind. And it was him told Deeds about overhearin' that conversation. He wouldn't tell on himself."

"His fingers are strong as steel wires," Stole muttered. "He's always about. He played in Mike Ryan's place, then killed Mike. He killed Banjo, and now he's playing a dirge." He shook his shoulders, swung to face Beaver. "Now that we know, we'll make short work of him. Drag Banjo to the cart and take him to the bay. See to it the weights are large. We want no more earless corpses. And take Johns along with you to the silent room. If any members should come down, I'd rather they didn't see Pete Johns here."

"I'll take him in the cart with Banjo to the bay," Beaver growled as he lifted Banjo by the collar and dragged him to the far end of the room and then through a narrow door. He came back for Pete.

"Just leave Johns in the silent room," Stole said. "This mob Nathan has roused tonight is in a nasty frame of mind. I'll feed Johns to them, after I'm sure he can't do any talking."

Sandy was on his feet, hobbling toward the narrow door at the back. "I'm to tend to Pete Johns," he said to Stole. "You won't want the knife used if you're goin' to make the mob think they got him. In the silent room, the sound of a gun won't carry."

Joke Stole had his mind on many matters. His face was set and hard again with confidence. He knew now what to do. Philip Nathan and his mob were a nuisance, but not a real threat. He nodded toward Sandy.

"Let the kid handle Johns," he said to Beaver Red.

Beaver dragged Pete across the floor and into the room that Pete knew must back the alley. He noted that the walls of the doorway through which he was dragged were very thick. This was what they called the silent room. Perhaps, as Sandy had said, the sound of a gun in here would go unnoticed. In a corner was a boxlike affair much like a wheelbarrow. As Beaver rolled it forth, Pete realized it was a cart similar to ones the Mexicans used to collect kindling.

Hastily Beaver heaved Banjo's body into the cart and covered it with a canvas. The door had swung shut and the only light in the room came from a sputtering candle. Pete was searching the place for a weapon but walls and floor were bare. He dared not lift his body, for Beaver's ears were sharp and his nerves jumpy. Then the door was opened and Joke Stole spoke.

"I'll give you some instructions before you go, Beaver," he said. "Get rid of Banjo fast and then come back to help Blackie with that crazy fiddler. Sandy will take care of Johns now, and while you empty the cart in the bay, Blackie will plant Johns' body where the mob will find it. The action upstairs is to be swift and—"

The door swung shut as Beaver Red passed from the silent room to get his instructions for the night's work. Sandy was also held back to listen to Joke Stole. Before the latch had more than

clicked, Pete was across the room and heaving at the body in the cart. He was not afraid of sound carrying to the other room, it was a question of how swiftly he could work and whether his strength would hold out.

He hoisted the body to the edge of the cart, heaved it to the floor and dragged it to the corner he had been occupying. He made it back to the cart and crawled in, hauling the canvas over himself. He was panting and pain was shooting in a thousand directions over his body. The wound in his side which had ceased to bleed during his long, quiet spell, spurted hot blood again. He turned under the canvas so his right arm was as free as possible. In his fingers he held Banjo's loaded gun. In the excitement that had gripped the Sanctum at the discovery of another victim of Durango, Banjo's holster had not been emptied.

Despite the pain he suffered, Pete knew he had gained strength during his rest. The blow Banjo had given him had been really a light one and his bullet wound was on the left side. He could still handle a gun with his right hand. He was thinking clearly and he had a fighting chance. If Beaver should get away with the cart before Stole discovered that the body left behind was that of Banjo's, things would be in a fair way to break in Pete's favor. If Stole should return with Beaver Red and go to the body in the corner, it would mean a finish fight on the instant. Pete fingered Banjo's gun to be sure he had it fitted at the best spot in his palm. He thought of Sandy. Had the kid really meant to swing back to Stole or had he been playing to save Pete Johns? If a fight to the death should flare, where would Sandy stand?

VIII.

Pete Johns lay still as the door swung open. He had arranged the edge of the canvas so he could see that door open. Beaver Red was standing there and Sandy was leaning on his arm. The kid held a gun.

Pete gave the outlaw more of a chance than he deserved but that renegade wasn't accustomed to doing his own killing.

"I'll do my duty to the brothers," declared Sandy. "Stole's sending now for someone to relieve Blackie at the sliding panel so's he can take care of Johns' body." The kid hobbled alone toward the corner where Banjo lay.

Beaver Red walked to the back wall, unlocked a door, opened it cautiously and listened. As Pete had figured, it led to the alley. There were still faint shouts from the mob and Beaver cursed.

Pete was watching Sandy. The kid was at the corner. Bracing himself with one hand against the wall, he leaned down closer to the still form. Suddenly he started, almost toppled over, then he straightened with a jerk.

"Get that cart out and shut the door," he snapped at Beaver. "So's I can do this job."

Beaver picked up the handles by which the cart could be either drawn or pushed, and rolled it into the alley. He dropped the handles and turned to lock the door.

Throwing off the canvas, Pete rose and stepped from the cart. Weakness made him unsure and dulled his skill. His feet stirred up sound as he landed on the ground and Beaver Red whipped about.

Pete jabbed a gun into Beaver's stomach. "Hands high as a tree!" he ordered.

The man's gasp was full of fear. He had already seen things happen that seemed impossible. The secrecy of the Sanctum had been violated by a crazy killer. Now a dead man had risen from the cart. Beaver acted while fear clutched him. Diving back from the gun in his middle, his hand darted for his holster. Pete's repeated command failed to reach his numb brain and he kept pawing for his weapon.

Pete fired and Beaver Red slumped with a strangling groan. Pete had kept his gun close to his body to dull the sound. Stole might still be in the middle room and would not hear the shot, and the mob was probably too busy with its own affairs to pay any attention. Several seconds passed and there was nothing to indicate that the disturbance had been heard. Pete took the key Beaver had left in the door as he swung, and put it in his own pocket. Taking the fallen man's gun, he thrust it beneath his waist-band.

As Pete hurried toward a side door leading to the Diamond gambling rooms, he was thinking of Sandy. Stole would know the kid had double-crossed him when Blackie went to carry away that body. But Blackie was staying at the sliding panel until relief came, and with events of the night going so crazily, that relief would probably be delayed. Pete was gambling Sandy's life that it would. He was taking time to warn the fiddler.

Sliding in through the little-used side door, he kept tight against the wall, remembering that Nathan and his mob were looking for a wounded man. The weird music of the mad fiddler's instrument was upon the place. The main gambling room was large, with eight tables in the center. Gold and silver coins were clattering. Men swaggered to the bar with pokes of dust and expertly pinched out the price of a drink. There were scales on the counter for weighing out of larger debts. The game tables lay brightly beneath the many ceiling lamps, and encircling them in lesser light and lesser glory, were booths of different types. One black-eyed Spanish girl sold cups of steaming coffee. Next to her stall a barber worked industriously.

Pete touched the arm of a youth who was gloomily making for the door swinging an empty poke.

"Will you take a request to the fiddler?" he asked.

The young man started to brush his fingers aside.

"It's a song I want to hear a lot," Pete said softly. "Heard it last the day I left for the West. Pa played it on his old fiddle."

The lad blinked and puckered his lips. "Home's a long way off," he said. Then: "Why don't you take the note yourself?"

Pete touched his bloody side. "I didn't dodge and a bullet caught me. I look pretty messy." Acknowledging a gun wound was a natural thing, and Pete could see that the youth had not been out with the mob.

"Sure, I'll take it to the crazy fiddler," the young man said. "My pa played a mouth harp better'n common. Evenin's we used—" He grabbed the note and made off with it. Pete felt certain the youth would not unfold and read the small paper; he was too full of gloom, memories and dulling effects of liquor to realize its importance. The paper had only two sentences:

Banjo talked before he died. Meet me on the balcony and we'll work together.

If the fiddler were completely mad, he would disregard the warning and scorn the offer of help. But Pete believed that back of the gleaming deeply sunken eyes lay a grain of reason. He was sure the fiddler would realize his danger and make ready to fight back.

Pete slid out of the gambling house and hurried back to the alley. The cart and Beaver Red were where he had left them. Fitting the key in the lock of the door, Pete opened it cautiously. The candle still burned in the room beyond, but no life was evident. He stepped inside, leaving the door open as an avenue of escape. The narrow door, leading to the inner room, was ajar, and Pete could hear the voice of Joke Stole. He moved forward until he could catch every word.

"Johns was in that cart Beaver hauled away and by now has probably killed Beaver. Blackie, get help and take the trail of Johns and that fiddler. *Neither of them must escape!*" Stole's voice was thin with strain. "*Go!*" he ordered. "I'll take care of the sliding panel and this kid."

Blackie's steps echoed back from the hall as he hurried off. Stole kept on talking, and Pete moved until he could see that the man was talking to Sandy. The kid was half sitting on a chair, half lying across the table.

"I was crazy to think I had Pete Johns fooled about his brother," Stole said. "Such talk is for pigeon brains like you. Speak up! What had you and Johns planned?"

"I'm not telling you anything, Stole," the kid answered and his voice rang with defiance.

Stole opened the drawer of the table and pulled out a whip with three lashes. On each lash was fastened a rough piece of steel.

"You'll talk," Stole promised.

"Go ahead, kill me," Sandy said defiantly.

"There's many ways to die. I'll give you one chance to talk. What did Pete Johns tell you? Is he working with that fiddler?"

Pete stepped into the room and Joke Stole, feeling his presence, swung to face him. Pete held a gun level with Stole's heart as he advanced toward the table.

"You've sent the Black Killer to get the fiddler," Pete said, "and Beaver Red is dead in the alley. That leaves you to fight your own fight, Stole. No hired gun to stand between you and death. No kid you've filled with lies to die for you. I see even your holster is empty. Your gun is on the table as though you might have threatened Sandy with death, then decided on the whip."

Stole was ghastly white, but his voice was fairly even when he spoke. "I had nothing to do with the death of your brother."

"We won't haggle about that. Blackie killed Teel under your orders. The orders that say no wounded man shall be left alive to talk."

"I never ordered his death!" Stole cried, and the control was gone from his voice. The gray-haired man, credited with iron nerves, was crumbling. "What are you reaching toward the table for?"

"I'm going to lay my gun there. I never shot a man in cold blood and I can't do it now—even you. I'll lay it there beside yours, then we'll both reach and I'll kill you."

Hope fanned in the gray eyes, then faded. "It's a trap!" he whispered. "A trap! You've got another way to kill me!"

Sandy tried to pull himself to his feet. "Stole's a snake," he warned Pete. "Don't give him a chance!"

Pete's hand had reached the table. He laid his gun down and withdrew his hand inch by inch, trying to hold Stole's glance as he talked.

"When I count two, we'll reach. Teel is watching this play, Stole. Feel him here in the room? The kid was a great one for evening a score. He'll enjoy this."

"You're crazy as the fiddler!" Stole whispered.

"One!"

Joke Stole bit his lips to stem the chill that was sweeping over him. Now that he had this slender thread of hope, a damnable shaking had struck his hands. "Wait!" he begged. The man who had ordered many men to their deaths could not now drive the palsy from his own lean body. "Wait!"

"Two!"

Pete's hand was across the table like lightning. He whipped up his gun and it spoke. Joke Stole had leaped to his chance with a terrible, hopeless sob. His stiff fingers missed the weapon. The next instant Stole was falling. Blood appeared above his heart as he toppled down to lie on his face.

Sandy was on his feet. "Pete," he whispered, "Teel was here. I felt him, too! And Joke Stole felt him!"

Pete told the kid to sit down. "I've got another job yet," he said. "I'll be back when it's done."

As Pete Johns hurriedly left the slant-ceilinged room, he heard Sandy trying to follow him.

"I'll be along fast as I can," Sandy called after him.

Pete left by the back door, hurried around the Diamond to the side entrance and slid into the big room. From a shadowy corner came the notes of the crazy killer's fiddle. Pete was sure that the message he had sent had not reached its goal.

He made his way to the steps leading to the balcony, desperately trying to think of a way to warn the thin man who sat back from the light in a cove of the room that protected his back and one side. The voice of the fiddle suddenly filled the room. It was as though the gates of hell had been thrown open and the evil of generations was cast upon the world. Men stiffened where they stood or sat. Fingers clenched on cards. The owner of the Diamond, Gill Andrews, came charging from his office under the balcony to roar at his guards.

"Throw that blasted fiddler out! Is the sheriff here yet?"

The scream of the fiddle reached its high point, then the sound snapped off as though the strings producing it had died of strain. While the echoes still jangled, a shot lifted them to new heights. Gill Andrews threw up his hands and stumbled three steps to the now bare center of the room. There he crashed like a tree that had been felled by an experienced hand. A laugh, thin with madness, quivered over the room.

Pete leaped up the stairway to the balcony. He knew now that the fiddler had gotten his message and that he had deliberately drawn Gill Andrews to his death before the last grand showdown. So Blackie and Stole had sent for the sheriff. The bellow of the San Francisco lawman was now filling the room below.

"Don't nobody move!" A madman is on the loose! We're all set to get him!"

"Fetch Phil Nathan!" somebody cried. "Maybe his crowd can find a neck here to fit some of the nooses they're carryin' around!" Even with a dead man stretched on the floor, and a madman hovering in the shadows, the patrons of the Diamond could enjoy this last sally.

Pete sped toward the back end of the balcony. There was a second stairway there that led to the

main floor. The fiddler would probably make for that, and if he did, the Black Killer would be in his wake. Pete crouched behind a chair as he heard steps coming. A jut in the wall kept him from seeing ahead, so he lined up his gun and waited. A body brushed against the wall as though somebody had lurched drunkenly. Then came a growl like an animal closing in on its prey.

Pete crept along the protruding wall until he could see the narrow strip of balcony floor beyond. The fiddler was backed against a chair, his shirt drenched with more blood than it would seem his thin body could possess. A knife was in his hand and he was leaning forward for the last second of a death battle. Before him was the Black Killer, great shoulders hunched, a gun hugged to his body.

Pete Johns lifted to his feet. The Killer felt a new danger. He fired a bullet into the fiddler and spun. Pete's gun roared, and in the same instant, the Killer's weapon answered. Both bullets found marks of human flesh. Pete weaved, already weak from loss of blood and pain. The Black Killer barely paused in his lunge forward.

The two guns belched again and again. The big man was like a wounded bear roaring its challenge. What could be seen of his face beneath his black mask was twisted, grotesque.

"I'll kill you!" Pete breathed. *"You murdered my brother!"*

The battle had surged back around the jut in the wall. Pete had dropped behind the thick home-made chair for some protection. The big man charged forward to tear the chair away and finish the fight. His breathing was like waves lashing. He was close, and the ceiling lamps were at his back leaving his eyes in shadow. Suddenly they were no longer black. They were balls of fire! *Like an animal's in the night.* Teel had whispered that to Pete as he died.

Pete rose up, scorning the protection of the chair. The last of his strength poured into his arm as he streaked his gun forth. He had it at a dead level with those balls of fire when he pressed trigger. The Killer fell across the chair, and his great body slackened, his long arms relaxed. His gun dropped to the floor.

In the room below the sheriff was uncertain of his moves. The fury of the gun fight on the balcony left him bewildered. At the front door confusion arose. The police guard stationed there was trying to keep someone out. The piercing voice of Philip Nathan rode every sound down and demanded entrance. The next instant the banker was striding across the main floor.

"Get back to the wall!" ordered the sheriff. "I'm closing on a crazy killer. Get back, Nathan!"

"I've heard you're closing in on Bull Durango," came Nathan's stern tones. "Call off your men, I want to talk with Durango."

Then Pete, sitting on the balcony with back propped against the wall, heard the voice of Sandy. The kid's words were coming in a rush, as though he expected a bullet to cut them off any instant.

"Call in your men, Nathan!" he cried. "The sheriff is with the Order. Pete Johns is fighting now to try and save Bull Durango!"

Pete tried to crawl to the railing of the balcony. He kept to the jutting wall for support, and thus he came again in sight of the fiddler. Durango's long arm was moving, his fingers were clawing for the violin that lay on the floor. He drew it to him and began to feel for the bow. The glitter was gone from his eyes, they were now like empty wells. Pete pushed the bow to his fingers and the man lifted the violin to his chin.

Then he realized that someone had aided him and he turned his dull eyes toward Pete. "I got your note," he said. "I waited to get the owner of this place. My work's not finished, I'm having to leave a great part of it undone. The Killer . . . Joke Stole . . . Beaver Red—"

"I got them," Pete said. "They killed my brother, Teel Johns."

"I thought you were Pete Johns," whispered the man. "I knew you were after them with me." A little color of madness crept into his soft laugh and for an instant a glow came to his eyes. "They drew my son into their net—and murdered him when he failed on a job. He told me their names before he died. I never slept nights until I thought of my great scheme." The laugh reached out like a trickle of fire. "Nobody hired me! Nobody told me to take their ears!" He was quiet a second. "You got Stole and Beaver and the Black Killer. Then I'm ready to go now."

He still had the strength to lift the violin. The bow slid across the strings and he began to play. The notes fluttered out from the balcony to the room below. There was no wildness, nothing of storm in the music. It whispered of a soul gliding into a dark, quiet haven.

The voice of the violin had a startling effect on the room below. The sheriff had been roaring orders when it started, but with realization that the mad fiddler still lived, the power drained from his voice. Pete crawled to the railing and, as the music died, spoke to Philip Nathan.

"The Black Killer is dead here on the balcony. Joke Stole is lying in the Sanctum and you'll find Beaver Red by his death cart in the alley. Grab the sheriff and his deputies, Nathan."

Commotion had burst with Pete's first announcement. It was doubtful if Nathan caught his last words, for the banker was leaping to action. A few shots were exchanged before Philip Nathan's volun-

teer police force was in control, but mostly the job was done with little trouble. Sheriff Dancing tried to get away by the stairs leading to the Sanctum, but Sandy had crawled to this spot. The kid was holding Dancing when Nathan came to his assistance.

By the time men were finally free to come to the balcony the fiddler was dead. He had toppled across his violin and his thin face was as tranquil as though he slept.

"Did you notice the last music he played?" someone asked. "It was soft, like he wasn't crazy any more."

Philip Nathan visited Pete Johns where he lay in a room of the building San Francisco called its hospital. It was noon of the day following the fight at the Diamond. The banker's face was gray with weariness, for already there had been three trials held by the committee of justice he had called into being, and three verdicts of death had been meted out.

"The hold of the Order of the Burnt Cross has been broken," Nathan told Pete. "You and the crazy fiddler did your job well."

"With the support of you and your committee," Pete added. "We could not have swept such a great evil from this city if the honest men of San Francisco had not been lifting up to fight with us."

As the banker was leaving, Pete asked that Sandy's cot be moved into his room. "The kid needs company," was the explanation he offered.

"I'll see that it's moved in," Nathan said. "Johns, the boy told me he had been a member of the Order. I'm glad he turned from them in time."

Pete made no reply. He wondered if Sandy had told of the midnight visit to the banker's home. The boy's cot was brought in, and when he and Sandy were alone, the lad mentioned that visit.

"Nathan wants to help me get started," he said. "I couldn't tell him about . . . that it was us that went to kill him." His voice was a bare whisper. "Pete, was you goin' to let me go through with that?"

"I threw my jackknife up the stairs, Sandy. I'm partly responsible for those wounds you're packing. That's why I wanted you in here where you won't get lonesome while you're getting well."

The boy lifted on his elbow. "You've a good head, Pete," he said warmly. "To have talked to me then wouldn't have helped. Thanks for these wounds."

Pete nodded. "You're welcome to them, kid. I've got plenty without them."

"I've been thinking of something this morning," said Sandy. "Teel told me about the ranch you was goin' to buy. Pete, can I go along with you to that ranch?"

Pete shifted his glance from the boy's eyes, stared past him into the wall. Moments passed.

"Forget I asked you, Pete," the boy whispered finally. "I . . . I can see how you'd feel. Like I was takin' Teel's place."

Pete's glance seemed to drive through the walls, for the quietness of the bay and the towering hills came to his eyes. Slowly he looked across at the boy.

"Sure you can come with me, Sandy," he said. "And you won't be taking Teel's place. You'll be building a place of your own."

THE END.

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Before Hank Trimble could risk a showdown with marauding sea wolves he had to learn the secret of Dismal Island and its mysteriously blighted fur crop

by Frank Richardson Pierce

BRAND OF THE LAWLESS

I.

For weeks Hank Trimble had been picking up newspapers as soon as they were dropped into refuse cans, and searching the Help Wanted—Male column. Today, looking over the latest batch of advertised jobs he saw a faint light of hope on his horizon as he read:

Wanted: Strong man under thirty, of resourcefulness and unquestioned courage, to undertake a mission in which he may lose his life should he make a mistake in judgment. Mission strictly legal and compensation, based on results, will range from $1.00 to $25,000.00 for six months' services. Applicants may expect a searching investigation of their background, and unusual tests to determine character. Apply Suite 700, Carroll Sherwin Hotel.

Hank liked the challenge in the advertisement and the prospect of adventure. He checked his qualifications: Twenty-five years of age, and of better than average strength—when he ate regularly. As for courage? He hesitated over the word. There were so many kinds of courage. That of a desperately sick person, for example, who refuses to give up. Or the courage that sends a man into a rapids or burning building to save another's life. The man who would plunge into the rapids might be afraid of fire. Would the fear of fire make him a coward? Hank didn't think so. He left the matter of courage to future decision.

The fact was, he had missed plenty of meals recently and was badly in need of a job. Unless there

was a catch neatly concealed in the advertisement, this proposition was what he was looking for. Glancing at the front page, he saw the paper was a first edition, with the ink hardly dry. There shouldn't be many ahead of him if he hurried.

The Carroll Sherwin was ten blocks distant. Hank Trimble walked there swiftly. He called Suite 700 on the house telephone and a girl's brisk voice said: "Yes?"

"I'm Henry Trimble," he said, "answering your advertisement. I'm in the lobby."

"Come up, please," the girl invited. "Don't knock. Walk in."

As Hank made his way to the elevator he saw a roughly dressed man step into the car. It shot upward with its one passenger and stopped at the seventh floor. He waited several moments for the car to return and, as the operator closed the door, asked: "Many ahead of me?"

"Two is all. One came back and the other's up there now," the operator answered.

Hank stepped out, followed the operator's instructions and walked down the hall to Suite 700. The man who had just gone up in the elevator emerged when Hank was about thirty feet from the door. "No need of applyin', buddy," the fellow grumbled, "there's a mug ahead of you, and is he tough! Said I'd have to lick him if I got the job."

"Who in blazes does he think he is?" Hank demanded, angry at such high-handed methods.

"He thinks he's plenty—and, man, he is!" the other man said.

Hank entered without knocking and found himself in a large reception room occupied by a slim, dark girl and a burly, wide-shouldered man. The girl sat under a tall floor lamp, reading. She lifted her eyes slowly to Hank, then lowered them. They were hard eyes, and her mouth was hard, too, but Hank had a feeling it was hardness born of heavy responsibility, the giving of orders and the handling of men.

The big man stood up. "You lookin' for that job?" he asked.

"Yes," Hank answered.

"Clear out, brother, before you get hurt," the man ordered. "I aim to get that spot for myself and I don't want any competition around."

"Then you'll have to throw me out," Hank said evenly, "because I can use that job myself."

"Easier done than said," the other observed, advancing.

The girl looked up again from her magazine. "Gentlemen, please," she said calmly, "if you must fight, do it quietly." She dropped her eyes to her magazine again.

"I'll try to keep your wishes in mind," Hank promised. He tossed his coat aside and met the big man's bull-like charge. Then he waded in. He had only a limited amount of strength and, physically, was in no condition for a long fight. He had to shoot the works at once and hope for victory.

Keeping his chin pulled close to his shoulder, Hank centered his attack on the other's stomach. He shifted slightly at the end of a minute and crashed his hardest punch over the heart, then as the huge man's guard lifted, he whipped in a left and right. The man's knees sagged, and he covered up. The door behind him opened and the largest man Hank had ever seen outside of a circus filled the doorway.

An Aleutian Islander, Hank thought at first; then he wasn't quite certain. There was an Oriental set to the man's eyes. A benign smile spread over his face, and, strangely enough, he didn't seem interested in the fight.

"He's nuts," Hank muttered. "What kind of a mess have I walked into?"

Hank's opponent suddenly lowered his guard and grinned. "You'll do, mister," he said approvingly. "Now let's get down to business." He scrawled "Job filled" on a piece of paper which he hung on the outside of the door. Then he returned and said: "Sit down, Trimble."

"If you had stayed with it another minute," Hank told him, taking a chair, "you would have won. I had fired the last shot in the locker."

"That's why I stopped," the other said. "Besides, your punches were making me sick at the stomach. I'm Lars Sverdrup. The big boy is Pete Savanoff. He picked up a head injury a couple of years ago and isn't quite right. He just smiles all the time, but he'll do anything you tell him."

"Anything?"

"Yes—even murder," Sverdrup answered, a note of grimness in his voice. "Now I'll turn you over to Mary Reagan. She's the boss."

The girl put down her magazine. "We aren't quite mad, Mr. Trimble," she said reassuringly. "And I wasn't really reading. I just wanted to see how you would react to an unusual situation. Because, if you accept my proposition, you will face situations that simply don't make sense. Lars' job was to scare you off if he could. Men who scare easily won't do for this job. You not only refused to scare, but you were ready to do battle."

"And did battle," added Lars.

"Tell me something of your recent history," the girl said.

"I've worked in logging camps, been a longshoreman, and deckhand on Puget Sound freight and passenger boats," Hank told her. "Two years ago I got sick. When I left the hospital I didn't have much money left. I was told I needed a long rest period, so I couldn't hold down a regular job."

Mary Reagan nodded and he went on:

"I went down to Shacktown, found a piece of ground nobody was using, borrowed a boat and rowed around the bay looking for dunnage. That's the boards ships use in stowing cargo," he explained. "I towed in enough dunnage to build a shack, bought a stove and a couple of chairs from a secondhand place, built tables and a bunk and was all set. I did odd jobs, caught salmon in the bay, salvaged copper, tin and other stuff from the refuse dumps and just about got by. Now I'm in shape again and ready for work, so I've been watching the newspapers."

"I'd like to see your shack Mr. Trimble," the girl declared.

"Oh, it's nothing," he said. "You wouldn't want to go to a place like that."

"Just bums?"

"No," he said quickly. "Men down on their luck, but still proud enough to want to live in a place of their own, even if it's a shack."

"I'm glad you defend them," Mary said. "I like your type better every minute. We'll go down and visit your place."

"All right, if you say so," Hank agreed.

A cab dropped them near the water front. Land, once used in ship building, was covered with scores of shacks. Some even had curtains at the windows, and vines growing around the walls. One man was hauling up a boat loaded with dunnage, and a couple of others were passing freshly caught salmon ashore.

Hank opened the door of one of the shacks. "Here you are, Miss Reagan."

She stepped inside. Everything was neat and orderly: dunnage split and cut into stove lengths, dish towels hung over the stove to dry and food properly stored on shelves. A threadbare suit of clothes was hung on a wire hanger and covered with newspapers to keep out the dust.

"This," the girl explained, "gives an index to your character. You don't let down when the going is hard."

"A man can at least hang onto his pride," Hank answered. He smiled. "Now I feel as if it's my turn to ask questions."

"Of course," the girl agreed. "Go ahead."

"What is your proposition?"

"My father experimented with blue foxes," explained Mary, "and developed a silver-blue."

"That should be worth plenty," Hank declared.

"Dad developed a dozen pairs of the silver-blue," the girl continued. "Then he wanted to breed on a large-scale basis. He found that a skin developed in a climate that was both damp and and cold carried a special luster. He decided the Aleutian Islands would be the ideal place for his fox ranch. They could run wild, and yet, being on an island, couldn't escape. The Aleutians, you know, extend westerly from Alaska."

"They extend so far," Hank said, "some of them are west of West—actually in the Eastern Hemisphere."

"Dismal Island, the one dad selected," Mary said, "is beyond the international date line. When it's today here, it's tomorrow there. It actually is the last West. Dad put me in school and sailed five years ago. He came out two years later and said the plan was proving successful. He sold his pelts at a thousand dollars each to a special market, bought a year's supplies and left orders for lumber and an additional year's supplies to be delivered the following year. Then when the trading schooner arrived they found the barabara in which dad had lived, but no trace of him."

Hank nodded. Barabaras, he knew, were the driftwood and sod huts built by the Aleutian natives.

"Were the foxes gone, too?" he asked.

"The schooner captain reported no silver-blues, but there were plenty of true blues. He thought the special breed had reverted to the original blue type. I didn't think so, because dad had proven to his satisfaction that they wouldn't change."

"Where does Pete Savanoff come into the picture?"

"Dad had mentioned him," the girl explained. "There was no trace of him two years ago, but last year he was found wandering around Dismal Island by a trading schooner captain who had put into the island for fresh water. He brought him here and I had the doctor examine the poor fellow. He found Pete had received a bad head injury two or three years ago and advised me to put him into a place for mental cases. But I feel he is the connecting link between my father and me, so I keep him with me constantly in the hope that he'll drop a word that will lead to something."

"What about Lars Sverdrup?"

"He was mate on the schooner that landed dad on the island five years ago," Mary replied. "A very loyal man to my father and, since dad's disappearance, to me. He's going along. The proposition is this: I pay all expenses and we'll organize an expedition to remain on Dismal Island a year and determine the fate of my father and the silver-blue foxes. If we find the foxes we should bring back several hundred thousand dollars' worth of pelts."

"How do you know some trader didn't raid the island, trap the foxes and sell them?"

"Because the number of silver-blue pelts now in use is known to the fur trade," Mary answered promptly. "If any new pelts had been sold, the trade would have heard of it."

That, Hank agreed, was logical reasoning. Nor

did he think Mary Reagan's estimate of the missing foxes too high. Women like to wear something smart and different, and will pay well for the privilege.

"What percentage of the clean-up do you plan to pay Sverdrup and me?"

"Fifteen percent to Sverdrup and you," replied Mary. "And I naturally expect the fifteen-percent men to do the planning and take the big risks."

"Naturally," he agreed. "Well, I'm ready to see this thing through to the end. Now what about you?"

"I'm going along, of course," she answered.

Hank's first impulse was to discourage this. He didn't want to be handicapped by a girl if he got into a tight situation. On second thought, he had an idea a girl with Mary Reagan's hard eyes and mouth wouldn't prove a handicap, no matter how tough the situation.

II.

A week after the interview with Mary Reagan and Lars Sverdrup, Hank boarded the fishing schooner *Esther* which was bound for the Aleutian Islands. As the schooner couldn't legally carry passengers, Hank, Lars and Pete were deckhands and Mary signed on as cook. The equipment totaled several tons, and included guns, ammunition, fox traps and food.

The *Esther* passed Cape Flattery, put her nose into a northwester, and kept it there the better part of a week. When the weather moderated they got onto the Great Circle and stayed there until they reached Unalaska.

Here, a skin umiak, capable of carrying two tons, and a two-hole kayak came aboard.

"Who's going to paddle the kayak?" Hank inquired, examining the frail skin boat with interest.

"You are, for one," Mary answered. "You wear a watertight parka, which is fastened tightly around the hatch combing, thus making man and craft one."

"The darned things carry no ballast and upset easily," Hank remarked. "Then a man finds himself head down in the water."

"And that man either rights himself with the paddle or drowns," the girl said.

"And after he's drowned a few times he learns the trick, eh?" Hank retorted.

He had to admit kayaks were effective craft for the purpose the natives had in mind when they designed them. As long as the two aboard were physically able to paddle, the craft would take the bad weather.

The *Esther* kept from five to ten miles off shore, but the grim, volcanic peaks seemed dangerously close at times. One of them was spouting fire, and ash drifted to the deck.

The ragged crests of the peaks broke up the storms roaring down from the arctic regions, and solid masses of black clouds were shredded and torn apart. Rain fell in torrents, at times turning to snow and hail. The steep mountain slopes were dense with tundra, and countless cascades and waterfalls frothed through the drenched green growth to the sea.

Reefs ringed some of the islands and the long, gray rollers suddenly broke into heaving white, smashed against solid walls and hurled backward into the sea. A ship had no chance except in some of the narrow harbors.

Relatively, it was a new land and parts of some of the islands had been lifted from the ocean floor in the memory of man. The heat from craters had melted the snow on some of the higher peaks, leaving exposed columns of twisted lava, and tortured ravines down which falling rain tumbled.

Dismal Island was shrouded in a pea-soup fog when they arrived and the skipper paced the deck and swore. Drift from the Orient moved slowly past the tossing schooner—glass balls from fish nets, wreckage of junks and fishing craft.

The fog pressed in about the schooner for nearly a week. At regular intervals the skipper, growing worried, headed out to sea.

"Can't take a chance on the reefs," he explained. "Half the time there's no beach to land on—even if you launched a small boat through the surf."

Pacing the deck early one morning, Hank heard the exhaust of another schooner's motor. He was about to sound the fog signal, when the schooner came out of the mists, passed astern and was gone. During the brief instant the mysterious craft was abeam, Hank saw a bearded face, with staring eyes, pressed against the porthole glass. Just as the schooner was disappearing, the heavy brass fitting holding the glass swung back, and a hand tossed a bottle into the sea.

Hank shouted and Mary came hurrying up from below.

"What is it?" she asked.

Briefly he explained, pointing to the approximate spot the bottle had dropped. With Pete Savanoff's help, a boat was launched and headed for the spot.

"Point!" Mary shouted. "Don't take your finger off the spot. That man might be my father."

Hank pointed, but although the girl made a thorough search, no trace of the bottle was found. Hank didn't want to give her too much hope, but he was confident the bearded man was a prisoner. By the time the small boat returned, the skipper was on deck. Hank described the other craft.

"That's the *Blue Otter*," the skipper said. "Owned and commanded by Bull Agen. Trades among the

Aleutian Islands and slips into the Arctic and works along the Siberian coast at times. A tough customer. Agen knows these islands and currents so well he travels full speed in the thickest fog."

"He nearly ran us down," declared Hank.

"We must be closer to shore than I reckoned," the skipper said. To be on the safe side, he headed out again. The fog lifted a little about two hours later.

"Never can tell where you are," the skipper commented. "We're three miles off Crater Island." He pointed to a strange formation to the northwest. "And we should have been off Dismal Island. That's her, astern. The two islands are about five miles apart—with plenty of reef and pinnacle rocks between."

"What's on Crater Island?"

"Nobody knows," the skipper replied. "No way of landing."

Through the glasses Hank saw a circular formation against which the sea beat on all sides. Undoubtedly the formation was a crater rim thrust up from the sea thousands of years ago. It was, roughly, eight or ten miles across. Within, Hank could see tundra growing on low hills. The rim had been badly notched by time and there was a single break in it. A series of reefs surrounded the break caused, Hank guessed, by lava flowing into the sea at one time.

"Let's land on Dismal Island as soon as possible," he suggested to the skipper. "It looks as if the weather was clearing over a wide area."

The *Esther* entered a small cove with a curving sandy beach and a low bench immediately beyond. The lumber shipped in for building purposes lay in piles. Water-soaked and green with moss, it was probably worthless by now. Hank's eyes took in but few minor details. He was getting a general picture of a barabara, fox pens, tundra growing down to the water's edge and sprinkled with wild flowers, and beyond that a brooding ridge—the high point on Dismal Island.

Hank mystified Mary Reagan and Lars Sverdrup by insisting on going ashore with the first boat, then hurrying to the top of the ridge. While the schooner hastily landed supplies, he spent a half-hour with binoculars pressed to his eyes.

"I thought I might see the *Blue Otter*," he explained on his return. "She isn't in sight."

"See any foxes?" Mary inquired.

"No silver-blues," answered Hank. "There were plenty of blues, though, but all of them were in bad shape from disease or lack of food. I didn't see a rabbit anywhere."

"Dad released hundreds of pairs of rabbits a year before he turned the foxes loose," Mary said. "Well, we can't solve every problem at once, so first let's get our supplies under cover."

They put in the next couple of days constructing two frame shacks from the mossy lumber, then set up a sheet-iron stove, fed it driftwood, and dried out the wood. In the larger building they placed the skin boats and half of the food and gasoline. In the smaller building they stored the remainder of the food and gasoline. "In case of fire," Hank explained, "all our eggs won't be in one basket."

In addition to the skin boats they had a heavy dory and two outboard motors. Hank hung an outboard onto the dory early the fifth morning and slowly circled the island. Wherever he saw a possible landing place he went ashore and searched the immediate vicinity. He was looking for rabbit sign, which he failed to find, and for foxes and anything else that would add to his knowledge of conditions. Everywhere the foxes were thin and sickly. Mostly they congregated on the scant beaches, eagerly eating anything the tide brought in. They fought one another for the bits of food, and pelts were frequently torn.

Unless the food problem was solved soon, the foxes would be dead, or their pelts in such condition they couldn't be marketed at any price.

Moving slowly along the easterly end of the island, Hank suddenly noticed a break in a half-mile stretch of bluff. He caught a glimpse of driftwood, a sheet of placid water and sandy beach. Turning in, he almost wrecked the dory on a reef. After that, he proceeded slowly to lessen the impact of possible reefs.

A trick of the tide had cast considerable driftwood into the cove. An exposed reef close to shore trapped the drift and someone had hauled up a pile to high ground and built a shack. Some of the shack timbers were heavy, others very light, but they had been put together skillfully. Ship's windows had been installed, and a steamer's cabin door, with a green brass knob, stood partly open.

Tundra grew between door and threshold, indicating that the door had been open a long time. Hank looked inside and saw a bunk covered with moldy blankets, rusty kitchen utensils and a shelf with rusty canned goods. A Colt .44 lay on the floor, the hammer back, ready for business. Hank picked it up, wondering how many loads had been discharged, and what had become of the man who had cocked the gun but never fired his last shot.

Though he examined the walls inside and out, Hank failed to find any bullet marks. He climbed a ridge behind the cabin and looked around. At first he saw nothing but tundra and an occasional fox, then something gray caught his interest. He hurried over and picked up a skull from which the lower jaw was missing. Some of the upper-jaw teeth had been filled with gold. Hank realized he

might be holding the remains of Mary's father. It was a depressing thought.

He put in three hours searching the tundra and found thigh, leg and arm bones, but no trace of the lower jaw. The bones were mossy and might have been there a long time, yet Hank knew moss grows swiftly in many parts of the North.

Wrapping the bones in a tarp, Hank headed for home. There wasn't time to complete his examination of Dismal Island that day.

As Hank entered the cove, he saw the *Blue Otter* anchored close to shore. Bull Agen and one of his mates had landed and were talking to Mary and Lars, while the mighty Pete hovered in the background.

Hank passed close to the schooner and peered quickly through the porthole that had framed the bearded face a few days previous. But the cabin was empty now. Hank saw only a pile of blankets at the foot of a bunk, and oilskins hung on the wall.

Hank landed some distance from Mary, hauled up the dory, then joined the group. He didn't want Agen's prying eyes to see the contents of the tarp. Mary was saying: "And so we are here to salvage something from the fox business my father tried to establish, Captain Agen." Then she turned and introduced Hank.

"Glad to know you, Trimble," Agen said. He had a deep, booming voice, shrewd, cold eyes of intense blue and a ragged black beard which looked as if it had been hacked away in spots. The hand he extended to Hank was thick, strong and badly scarred across the knuckles. Here was a man who ruled by physical force.

Agen's eyes betrayed his recognition of the fact that Hank Trimble was the leader of the little group and a man of intelligence and courage.

"I just dropped in, Trimble, to say I trade all through the islands," Agen explained. "I won't give you as much for your fur as you can get at the auctions in Seattle, but I'll do better than anybody else in these parts. I'll put in from time to time and maybe we can get together."

"Nothing like trying," Hank said without committing himself. He had seen Agen's breed before, and he didn't like it, but he knew there was no use betraying his feelings.

The *Blue Otter's* mate returned to the schooner and sent the boat back in charge of a strange creature Agen addressed as Wong. The man had the complexion of a white person who had spent most of his life indoors, and he had a white man's nose, mouth, jaw and other physical structure, but his eyes were Oriental, and he had a very thin mustache which hung straight down on each side of his mouth. He carried a short, wide, two-bladed knife, the hilt of which was wrapped with brass wire.

"I won't need the dory for an hour or so," Agen said, "so enjoy yourself, Wong."

"Thank you," Wong said without a trace of accent. He wandered about the cove, his eyes darting from object to object, and probing Hank and Pete. He passed close to Hank's dory and started to lift the tarp.

"Hey!" Hank warned. "Drop that!"

He was too late. The skull and limb bones rattled to the dory's bottom boards and Mary Reagan looked up quickly.

"Hank!" she exclaimed. "What—"

"Hold on!" Hank said sharply, catching the girl's expression. "Don't jump at conclusions. They're bones from a native I found today. I thought they should be buried and—" He tried to stop her, but she brushed by and picked up the six-gun. For a moment Hank thought she was going to faint.

"My father's Colt," she whispered. "I'd know it—anywhere." She looked long and intently at the skull, then allowed Hank to lead her away.

III.

The confusion gave Bull Agen a chance he had been looking for. He nodded his head toward Sverdrup, then stepped behind the shack. Sverdrup followed.

"Leave it to Wong to uncover something," Agen said.

"He can always be depended on to get people's attention," Sverdrup agreed. "I didn't know Trimble had found Reagan's skull. He said nothing to me about it."

"That fellow is out to do himself some good," Agen growled. "Dangerous. I want him put out of business. Wong could do the job, I suppose."

"He generally does those little things for you," Sverdrup said.

"But I don't want him mixed up in this one," continued Agen. "Now what's the matter with Pete Savanoff? He'll do anything a man tells him to do."

"He'll do anything *some* men tell him to do," Sverdrup corrected. "He'll obey me, or Mary Reagan. He hasn't made up his mind about Hank. I've seen him refuse others, and turn on them if they insist on ordering him around."

"Almost sane, eh?" Agen said. His face was thoughtful, his eyes calculating. "Something might happen and he'd remember how he got the crack on the head, eh?"

"That could be," admitted Sverdrup. "Suppose you leave Pete to me."

"Just so Trimble is looked after," Agen answered. "I didn't think Mary could dig up a man

like him. He thinks there's an answer to the silver-blue foxes, Reagan's disappearance and all that. Well, I'm going to shove off late tonight. Don't know when I'll be back, but you can handle things your own way. And when the time comes, you'll get your cut."

"Yes," Sverdrup said, and there was black hate in his eyes, "when the time comes, I'll get my share."

Darkness had settled and Hank threw off the Mackinaw he had been wearing, and went to work in the shed, restacking supplies. He had almost completed the job when Mary came in. The girl still looked wan and pale.

"Where is everyone?" Hank asked.

"Agen and his crew are a half mile up the beach, loading fresh-water casks his men filled while he was talking to us," Mary answered. "I don't know where Lars and Pete are. Lars said something about a big timber that had drifted into the cove. He's probably beaching it."

"Pete is the equal of a horse when strength is needed," Hank said. "He's probably doing the work and Lars is bossing—" He broke off, holding up a warning hand. "Did you hear anything? A gurgling sound?"

Mary shook her head.

"Imagination," Hank said, and continued his work. "Now about this man Agen. Is he a friend of yours?"

"No. Dad knew him well," Mary explained. "Agen often dropped anchor at Dismal Island, and even sent dad Aleut helpers who understood fox culture. I met him several times when he was outside on business."

"Somehow he doesn't ring true," Hank said. "I just wanted to be sure he wasn't an old family friend." He finished rearranging the supplies. "Now we can find things if we need them in a hurry," he declared. He sat down and lit a cigarette.

They heard the clump of boots, then Sverdrup's sudden exclamation. "Nearly fell over a man. Here! Agen, turn a light on this. By Satan! It's Hank Trimble."

"Oh, no, it isn't," said Hank, hurrying from the storage shack. "But he's wearing my Mackinaw."

Hank's eyes never left the dory with its grisly cargo and suddenly he saw Wong start to lift the tarp.

"Wong!" Agen exclaimed, as they turned the dead man over. "Who did this?"

"Someone out to get me," Hank said quietly.

"How did he get your Mackinaw?" demanded Agen. "Say! You murdered him and put it on—"

"Go easy," warned Hank, "and be sure of your ground before you try to pin this killing on me. Mary Reagan knows I've been working in the shack ever since I took off the Mackinaw. But I'd like to know what this is all about. Maybe the murderer was supposed to get me, and Wong put my Mackinaw on because he was cold, then was killed by mistake."

"You stay here and watch things," Agen said. "I'll get hold of my men."

"I'll help round them up," offered Sverdrup. As soon as the two were alone he turned on Agen. "Wong was strangled. Did you order Pete to do it? It looks like his work."

Agen hesitated. "I told him to get Trimble. I

wanted to find out if the blasted fool would take orders from me. And he got the best man I ever had. I'll kill the—"

"Hold on," Sverdrup admonished. "If a gun went off accidentally, killing a friend, you wouldn't throw it away."

"Hm-m-m." Agen was thoughtful. "I guess you're right. There's a lot of savvy locked up in thing to feed the foxes." He dropped his hand on her shoulder. "And don't be too sure your father is dead. Mind you, I haven't anything to go on, but I just don't believe in giving up until I have absolute proof."

"I argued along that line all last night," Mary said soberly, "and got nowhere."

Nothing more was said, but after breakfast, Mary

that Nordic skull of yours. We might need that *gun*—later."

They picked up Agen's men and returned to get Wong's body. "If anything happened to him," the schooner captain said, "he wanted to be buried at sea. And that's the way it will be. Take him aboard, men."

Hank, Mary, Sverdrup and Pete watched the dory vanish in the shadows.

"Poor man!" Pete repeated over and over again. "Poor man! Something kill him."

Standing apart from the others, Sverdrup shuddered. "I don't think he even knows he done it," he muttered. "And if he can't remember things, then how could he be tricked into admitting something else he might do?"

Hank put Reagan's six-gun to soak in kerosene, then turned in. Sleep came slowly. There was too much to think over, and twilight of the new day was coming before he really slept. He awakened abruptly with the feeling that he was groping his way through a fog, and the ground about was pitted with thousand-foot shafts. He dressed and went over to Mary's shack. The girl was getting breakfast.

"What are your plans for today, Hank?" she asked.

"Finish my inspection of the island," he answered. "And keep my eyes open for fish or something else." insisted on going along with Hank.

"I'm going to follow the beach on foot this time, and look at the streams," he explained. "We might get a salmon run and that would solve the food problem. If not, we'll have to pray for a whale."

"A whale!" exclaimed Mary. "How in the world would we handle it?"

"I don't know," he admitted, "but when people are desperate, they usually devise a way to do things."

They walked a while in silence, then Hank stopped. "Do you notice there's a lot of drift—fine stuff, and unusually high on the beach?"

"High tide," she suggested.

"Yes, but back at camp the debris was left at the normal high-water mark, while here it's quite a bit above that mark. Waves from a storm would do it but there was no storm last night. Obviously the waves were made by a fast, powerful boat which throws back plenty of water. And the *Blue Otter* was the only boat to enter the cove."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you," said Mary.

"For reasons best known to himself," Hank explained, "Bull Agen has his schooner equipped with an unusually powerful motor—one that can drive it twice as fast as similar schooners. This whole business is a jigsaw puzzle, and maybe some of the pieces don't look as if they would fit into

the general pattern, but we'll keep them just the same."

"That explains why Agen wasn't in sight the time you climbed the ridge and looked," she said. "He was over the horizon."

By noon they had walked almost seven miles and hadn't found anything of interest save half-starved foxes working the beach.

"Tired?" Hank asked Mary.

"No," she answered. "I'm good for a few more miles."

"Then we'll take a look over the next headland—it's the nearest to Crater Island—and see what's there."

It was slow walking through the heavy, drenched tundra, and though each wore the lightest of rubber boots, there was a constant drag on feet and legs.

They cleared the headland and looked into a cove some two hundred feet below them. Zeke Reagan had named the main cove Snug. But if that could be termed "Snug," this one was Rough Cove. It was littered with debris that had skirted Crater Island.

"You sit down and rest," Hank ordered, "and I'll go down and look around."

He was nearly to the bottom when Mary gave a sharp cry. She pointed and Hank saw a fox vanish in the tundra just ahead, then reappear in the pile of driftwood. A moment later it disappeared under deck timbers from some lost ship. Hank's pulse pounded furiously, and Mary almost fell in her efforts to join him.

"I saw it! I saw it!" she panted. "A silver-blue!"

"Yes, and in prime condition, too," Hank added. "Look over there." He pointed to two half-starved blues. "They're about all in. That means this fellow either has a private food supply, which doesn't make sense, or just landed here and hasn't had time to get thin." His eyes lifted to Crater Island. "I'm going to look that place over one of these days."

"How?"

"I don't know." He began poking into the wreckage and presently pulled out a cage built of thin slats and nails. The nails were the galvanized kind commonly used in marine construction. "They don't build cages with these nails," he commented. Again he lifted his eyes to Crater Island, now almost shrouded in mists and ringed by reefs and foaming surf. He had a hunch the cage was built of Crater Island driftwood.

"Let's find out something," he said. He selected about a hundred pounds of the driest wood and packed it slowly to the highest point above the cove. There he built a fire, waited until it was burning furiously, then heaped on tundra. A cloud of smoke mounted slowly into the air. As soon as it reached the upper levels it vanished.

He waited two hours for an answer but none came and he went back to the place where he had left Mary.

"I've been looking at the cage," she said. "See, there are teeth marks on the wood. The fox gnawed his way out. I imagine that happened after the cage washed into the cove."

They returned to Snug Cove and found Sverdrup and Pete gathering driftwood and cutting it up for fuel.

"You missed something," Sverdrup declared. "A couple of killers chased three white whales into the cove. You know how they do—tear at the whale's lips and tongue, and keep him down until they drown him. Then they go on killing something else. The whales kept breaking water and I saw a killer twice. They went out to sea again."

"Pete," Hank ordered, "your job is to patrol the beach. If you see the remains of a whale, let us know. It means fox food."

"Sure," Pete said slowly. "Sure! I watch. Foxes hungry all time. Come into camp and eat scraps."

After the evening meal, Hank loaded a hundred pounds of wood onto the giant's back and took a load almost as large himself. They climbed to the highest point on the island and built a fire.

"Go back down, Pete," Hank ordered. "Get my sleeping bag and bring it to me. I'm going to sleep up here tonight."

An hour later he spread the bag so his eyes would be facing Crater Island. He awakened twice before one o'clock and added fuel to his own fire, but Crater Island remained an inky shadow on a dark horizon. At three o'clock Hank awakened again. Now in that velvety black to the west, he saw a ruby gleam. It burned steadily, like a distant star, for about ten minutes, then it blazed and tongues of flame leaped from it. Slowly the tongues fell back, and the fire became a steadily burning star once more.

"That settles it!" Hank told himself excitedly. "There are people on Crater Island. I don't know how they got there, nor who they are, but I've a hunch."

He went back to sleep. Rising at five o'clock, he made his way down to camp. Pete Savanoff gave him hardly a glance, but Sverdrup ran up and clutched at his sleeve in his excitement.

"You saw something," he said. "I can tell by the way you hurried down."

"Yes," Hank admitted. "I saw something." He told them what had happened, while Mary finished getting breakfast.

Later Hank studied the bidarkas, the two-hole

skin boats. "Do you suppose," he said, "two of these could be lashed together in a way that would keep them from upsetting?"

"One acting as a sort of outrigger, like the Hawaiians use?" Sverdrup inquired. He considered a moment. "It might work. What have you got in mind?"

"Paddling through the tide rips and what not to the break in the crater wall, then going inside," Hank replied.

"I studied those tides a lot when I was with Reagan," Sverdrup said. "We agreed that a boat might get to the break running with the tide, but couldn't get back again."

"Why not wait for a change in tide and come back with it?"

"That's when all hell lets loose," Sverdrup replied. "The Bering Sea tides and the Pacific tides tangle, and sometimes it looks like a feather bed ripped apart. Of course, there's a slack-water period, but it never lasts long enough for a man to get through to safety."

"I'm going to try it," Hank declared. "Will you go with me, or shall I take Pete Savanoff? He's powerful, but he's pretty heavy."

Sverdrup hesitated. "I'll have to think about that," he said finally. "Whatever's best for the good of the cause, I'll do. I ain't afraid, you understand, but we can't afford to make a mistake in judgment—like Mary's advertisement said."

Hank, after considerable thought, was convinced he could learn to paddle a bidarka and keep it upright, but precious weeks or even months might pass before he could handle the craft in all kinds of water. The outrigger idea seemed logical, but he knew he was a goner if the skin boats parted company in bad water.

Two days later he was at work making them into a single unit when Pete Savanoff came into the shack. The big fellow's mighty lungs were giving forth great blasts of air. It was evident he had covered a lot of ground in a short time.

"Whale!" he panted. "In the next bay. Plenty grub for foxes." He sat down weakly. "Come quick. We will catch them the Aleut way."

Hank didn't know much about the method, but Sverdrup did. In a few minutes' time the dory and umiak were launched. Hanging an outboard motor on the dory, and towing the umiak, they made it to the cove entrance in a half-hour.

Pete took command. He placed Hank and Mary in the umiak, and dropped it inshore, near the cove entrance. He pulled in the motor, then rowed a short distance away and faced the shore.

Two whales, racing back and forth, were trying to find their way from the harbor. A reef, which curved inward, kept turning them back, but suddenly they cleared it. One of them came to the surface and blew, the spray drifting back from the blowhole like steam.

Pete, who seemed completely normal at the moment, began slapping his oar hard on the water, creating a splash. Standing in the dory's bow, Sverdrup was going through the same operation. The whales came close; then, sensing danger, turned aside. Now they were bearing down full speed on the umiak.

"Splash as you never splashed before," Hank shouted. "If one of those babies hits this skin boat, we'll go a mile in the air."

"I don't care about the air," cried Mary, who seemed to be enjoying the excitement. "It's what will happen when I go under the water that worries me."

Fifty feet from the umiak, the leading whale broke water and swerved. The skin boat rocked dangerously, then became steady as the whales retreated. Far up the cove one of them stranded and churned the water into muck. It spouted mud twice before it got clear. Again the whales rushed at the entrance, only to be turned back by the din of oars against water.

"Their eardrums are only about as big as a boy's clenched fist," Hank said, "but I'll bet they can hear what's going on. There they go back again. If we can keep this up a half-hour—" He began splashing water, too.

About twenty minutes later the whales stranded.

"Look!" Mary said in a low, tense voice. "The expression on Pete's face."

The big fellow had changed from a simple-minded man to a creature intent on the kill. "A hundred generations of people who've had to take food from the sea or starve are behind Pete," Hank said. "He's like a man cornered."

Pete cupped his hands. "Come over here quick!" he ordered. Hank and Mary paddled alongside the dory. "Get out, Mary," Pete ordered. "Stay where you are, Hank. We have to work quick. If the tide comes in, they will start swimming again."

He had brought along a pole to which was fitted a harpoon. He placed this in the bow, then looked back as if for possible signs of fear on Hank's face.

"We'll paddle beside him, and I'll finish him," he said. "Keep the umiak away from his tail."

At that moment the whale knocked about half a ton of mud into the air with his tail, and Hank caught the point of Pete's order. Paddling furiously, they came in at an angle. Hank gave his paddle a twist and brought the umiak alongside the muck-covered animal. With a grunt, Pete drove the harpoon deep; then, bracing himself, pulled until the head detached itself. He attached a long line to a float, tossed it overboard to mark the spot should the whale sink when the tide came in, then reached for his paddle. A flipper flashed

and knocked the skin boat into the air and as it came down Hank's feet came in contact with the whale's rough hide. He managed to shove the umiak clear and tumbled aboard.

The umiak was undamaged except for cracked ribs, and to Pete it was a minor incident to be taken in stride. He fitted a new head and line to the harpoon shaft, then went after the next whale. The blow was true and, except for a violent threshing of the tail, nothing happened. A hundred yards off, Hank wiped his brow.

"Wow! What a sport!"

"No sport," Pete argued. "Something for the foxes to eat." Slowly, surely, he was slipping back into his usual way of life—huge, smiling, stupid.

IV.

Hank put Sverdrup and Pete to work cutting up the whales and distributing the meat at various points on the island. It didn't take the foxes long to locate the feed depots, and each one was jammed. Hank limited the amount of food because he was afraid the starved animals might gorge themselves. Mary had estimated that the blues on the island were worth nearly fifty thousand dollars, provided they could be properly fed. Otherwise they weren't worth a dime a dozen.

While the men were distributing food, Hank continued to work on the bidarkas. He covered the hatches of the poorest one with canvas and painted it, then he fixed a framework between the two. This done, he tested the craft on the beach and later in the water

When the job was completed he called Sverdrup. "How about it?" he asked. "Going with me?"

Sverdrup shook his head. "I've checked it over from every angle, and Pete's the man to go. He's had plenty of experience in these waters, knows the tricks, and in an emergency may act on instinct as he did in killing the whales."

"O. K.," Hank said shortly. He hoped Pete's great strength would offset his heavy weight. The bidarka would support two men easily enough. In fact, natives frequently stuffed an extra child or two inside when they made short trips and for some reason the children never smothered. Hank might have thought Sverdrup was yellow if the man hadn't stood up against him in the hotel room. Besides, yellow men don't spend much of their lives in the Aleutian Islands waters.

When he explained the trip he had in mind to Pete, the giant smiled. "Sure, I'll go with you," he said. And that was all.

When weather conditions were favorable, they loaded the two bidarkas into the umiak, lowered an outboard motor through a well built within the skin craft, and headed to within three miles of the island. Even here the water boiled and broke as deep currents worked through submerged reefs.

"Better stop," Hank directed. "If the motor quit you'd be in a bad way."

Sverdrup slowed down, gave Mary the rudder, then helped Hank and Pete with the bidarkas. They squeezed through the hatches of the larger craft, then pulled the bottoms of waterproof parkas around the hatch rim and lashed them tightly. Each carried a paddle, with spares secured to the outrigger framework. The other bidarka rode lightly, lifting almost clear of the water when the heavier craft wallowed.

Sverdrup shook hands with Hank, then shifted back and took Pete's hand. "Good luck, Pete," he said in a low voice, "and remember what I told you to do."

"Sure, I remember," Pete answered.

A moment later Hank shoved off. The umiak, with motor turning over, had held its own against the current, but now that the bidarkas were free they were carried swiftly into white water.

Waves began to break over the deck and at times foam and spray blinded Hank, who was handling the bow paddle.

"You can tell where the reefs are close to the surface by the way the water breaks, Pete," he yelled over his shoulder. "We'll keep clear of such spots and head toward the break in the crater."

They paddled steadily for fifteen minutes then the sea suddenly changed. The water over about a hundred-yard stretch began revolving. The surface changed from foam to little sharp ridges and the center of the area began sinking.

"Whirlpool!" yelled Hank, driving his paddle furiously.

Pete almost lifted the bidarka out of the water with each paddle stroke. The framework creaked and groaned under the stress. They slipped below the rim and some fifty feet of water lay beyond and above them. The outrigger bidarka, which kept them upright was now a drag. They lost another twenty feet and Hank could look down and see black rocks awash in the center of the pool.

"Let's see if we can't lift the outrigger bidarka clear," he yelled, "and drive toward the rim at an angle. If we get into the center, we're through."

Hank leaned over, then Pete shifted his heavy bulk. The outrigger bidarka cleared the surface. Now the native's skill came into play. He kept the other bidarka in the air or touching lightly. Slowly, surely, they cleared the pool and drove the craft into the smother of foam beyond.

Hank realized now that the whirlpool wasn't fixed, but moved through the water like a whirlwind, though much slower. They were within a mile of the break in the crater and the umiak was

no longer visible. "They'll probably think we were sucked under," Hank said. His arms were almost numb from the effort and even Pete's stroke had lost some of its drive.

The water between them and the crater entrance was a mass of whitecaps, reminding Hank of the rapids in a river. Suddenly he saw a pinnacle of rock awash. It seemed to speed past them, and he realized a tremendous current ran through the entrance. Obviously, he reasoned, there must be a break in the crater rim beyond. The great volume of water had to run somewhere.

Waves piled up five and six feet high a quarter of a mile from the entrance and there was no escaping them. They broke over the two men and pounded down the skin craft a few minutes later, but the buoyancy was great and each time the bidarkas lifted. Pete's tremendous strokes kept them headed in the right direction.

The walls lifted three hundred feet above them and now the water piled high as it converged on the point. No moss grew here, for the speed of the tide was too great. The channel was between two and three hundred feet in width and probably a quarter mile in length. It ended in a ring of water from which twisted masses of lava lifted. Within the ring lay bleak but low ridges of lava, and flats of rich soil heavy with tundra.

"No place to land," Hank remarked to Pete, "so let's drift with the tide. I don't mind admitting I need a breathing spell."

"I wonder how we get out." This problem had impressed itself even on Pete's simple mind. A mile beyond, the water began piling up against a sheer wall. Hank regarded this curiously until he saw a ship beam, with broken planking attached, upend and vanish.

Pete had already seen the danger and was driving his paddle hard into solid water. The bidarka struck the wall and bounded off with a force that would have shattered a wooden boat. Hank clawed at the wall and swung the stern in, then Pete's big hand grasped a twisted bit of lava and held. Hank looped a line over an outcropping and made it fast.

The two men, panting and weak from their efforts, relaxed. Hank, leaning back on his elbows, saw a head peer over the rim of the cliff. "Look, Pete! A fox!" he shouted. The little animal had caught their scent and was trying to locate them. He shifted several feet and Hank caught a good look at his body—a beautiful silver-blue. "This is the end of the trail, Pete," he declared. "Here are the silver-blue foxes."

A sense of elation swept through him. A fortune in foxes trotted over Crater Island, and fifteen percent of the take was his. But elation was swiftly followed by depression. How could a man leave the island, much less take as little as one pelt with him?

The two men sat there a couple of hours before the tide changed and water and debris stopped flowing through a submarine hole in the volcanic wall.

"Let's paddle the other way," Hank said. "We took the easy route when we came in and nearly ended up in Davy Jones' locker."

They paddled slowly through what appeared to be a circular lagoon. They had gone nearly three miles before they found a break in the inner wall, then it came suddenly, as if some upheaval had split the wall apart. Hank had a six-gun in the inside of the bidarka, ammunition and some food, but he had an idea gunplay would have no part in the day's adventures.

Hank paddled a short distance, then whirled around, grinning, to look at Pete. "Smell it?" he cried. The peculiar odor of smoke from wood that had once been soaked in salt water filled his nostrils. They rounded a low, lava rock point and a settlement of seven barabaras and cabins lay dead ahead.

A bearded white man came out of a driftwood shack, picked up an ax and began chopping wood. Suddenly he turned and stared. He dropped the ax and rubbed his eyes, then gave a yell. A half-dozen silver-blue foxes scattered for the nearest cover. The man jumped up and down, yelling as if he had suddenly lost his reason, and finally two others came out and ran down to the water's edge. One put a pair of binoculars to his eyes, then dropped them.

"White men! White men!" he yelled. He picked up the glasses again and Hank could see that his hands were shaking. "Pete! Pete!" the man suddenly bellowed. "Pete Savanoff!"

"Who is he? Zeke Reagan?" Hank's heart was pounding with excitement.

"Never saw him before," Pete answered stolidly.

The three men ran back and forth along the beach, making motions with their arms—unconscious motions, as if they would help paddle the bidarka.

The one who had done the talking was evidently the leader. He ran into the water and drew the skin boats to the beach, then he helped Hank and Pete to their feet. Hank staggered and sat down. His legs were cramped from their unusual position.

"You're no Aleut squaw, stranger," the leader observed, laughing for the first time. "I'm Zeke Reagan! Don't know why Pete doesn't recognize me."

"He had a bad head wound," Hank explained. "Pete, this is Zeke Reagan, Mary's father."

As Pete gravely shook hands, Reagan said: "Mary! Is she all right? There are a million questions I want to ask."

"And we want to ask nearly as many ourselves," Hank said. He got uncertainly to his feet and

Reagan helped him walk. "Mary's on Dismal Island right now, and she's fine. Who are the other fellows?"

"Tom Lacy and George Frater," Reagan answered. "Men I hired to develop my fox business."

"Are they loyal to you?"

"They've had to be," Reagan replied. "But they're the kind that stick anyway."

Hank told him of Mary's advertisement, and the tests he was put through before she accepted him.

Reagan chuckled. "Sometimes folks don't feel that their children pay attention to their lectures, but Mary did this time. I've said again and again, 'Be sure to pick the right man for a job, then don't bother him. Let him do it!'"

"Mary's let me run things ever since we landed," Hank said, "and she's also backed me right down the line."

"What tipped you off to Crater Island?" Reagan asked.

"The arrival of a healthy fox and finding a partly gnawed cage in the drift that came from this island," replied Hank.

Reagan nodded. "I watched the drift for months before I was sure that stuff dropped into the water when the tide was running a certain way would reach Dismal Island. We made a raft of rabbit skins—something like a skin boat—put a cage on it and a fox inside, then turned it loose. I figured Mary would send somebody. I knew there was almost no feed on the island and thought a healthy fox would start them to wondering. I knew the fox had made it through and somebody was wondering when I sighted your signal fire."

"How did all this come about in the first place?" Hank asked.

"When I leased Dismal Island I needed transportation to get my foxes, supplies and gear to the island," explained Reagan. "Lars Sverdrup gave me a good price. We made the deal, then Bull Agen came along and offered a better proposition. Naturally, I turned him down. He apparently took it the way a man should, and said as long as I had made a deal to stick to it. Later he showed up at the island, inquiring if I needed anything, or had any mail I wanted to go out. That's common, and I thought nothing of it."

"No reason why you should," Hank agreed.

"I had first stocked the island with rabbits to take care of the food problem, then turned the foxes loose," Reagan continued. "Just when I thought things were going fine, Bull Agen dropped in. Lafe Capp, one of my men, said there was something up, and to get ready for trouble. He said Bull had changed his crew and the new men were a hard lot. I gave Lafe my six-gun, another one to Pete Savanoff and kept a rifle for myself. Tom Lacy and George Frater had their own guns. Bull came ashore alone and we felt kind of cheap so we hid our guns."

"Played right into his hands, eh?"

"Yes. Thought he wasn't armed, and that threw us off our guard. After dark, while Agen was asking me how I managed to breed a silver-blue, some of his men landed 'way up the beach in a skin boat. They sneaked up and Agen knocked over the stove, pretending it was an accident. While we tried to put out the fire, the men came charging in. Bull threw his arms around me from behind and I never had a chance to draw a gun. Neither did Lacy or Frater. Pete and Lafe Capp opened fire and wounded a couple of them, then picked up bullets themselves."

"I found part of Capp's bones in a shack," Hank said. "He must have gone there, wounded. Pete was picked up on the island later."

"They hunted for both of them but never found either," Reagan concluded. "Bull said he was out to make a clean-up on silver-blue foxes, and that he needed us in his business. He put us on this island and spent the following year on Dismal Island himself, trapping rabbits and foxes, which he brought here. Then from what I've heard when his men talked, he turned a lot of blues loose to make folks think my special breed had gone back to the blue type."

"How did Agen ever get a boat here and away again?"

"A likely question," Reagan agreed. "His *Blue Otter* has the most powerful marine engine in the north. It comes in at certain times of the year, lands supplies and goes away again. I watched it once, and it bucked right through the tide when any other boat would've been caught and smashed."

"Of course you haven't any guns."

"No. Agen cleaned us, but I managed to smuggle my binoculars here in an old pair of hip boots," Reagan said.

"What are Agen's plans?"

"We took a few pelts last winter to cut down the fox population—they were eating too many rabbits—and this winter Agen planned on the big clean-up. That includes us. Dead men tell no tales, you know," he commented bitterly. "Now if this new fur is eased onto the market right, and those who can afford it are made to pay a stiff price, we have a two-hundred-thousand-dollar fur crop right here."

"Which is what you had in mind from the start," Hank commented.

"That's right. I used the word 'crop' as a cattleman or hog raiser would use it. I began years ago, worked slowly, learned my mistakes the hard way. Then when I'm set to reap my harvest, a man comes along and takes over by force. That's a situation that's as old as man himself, I guess."

"But another situation equally as old is that of the crop owner beating the raider," pointed out Hank.

"Maybe, but I don't know how we're going to do it," Reagan said. "We've spent months trying to think up a scheme that would really work. Agen comes without warning, and he lands with his men heavily armed. In the past it's been ten or twelve husky young fellows against three men over middle age."

"The element of surprise will be in our favor this time," Hank predicted, "and I've got a gun."

"They number ten or twelve," said Reagan. "Understand, I'm not trying to discourage you. I'll go after 'em barehanded because I'll be fighting for my life and something that's taken a long time to develop. What have you in mind?"

"Getting the upper hand and capturing their schooner," Hank said. "Originally we thought we might paddle back to Dismal Island. But that's out. A fox supported on a skin contraption, floating lightly, might make it through, but two heavy men couldn't successfully buck those tides when they flowed the other way."

V.

Hank waited until he had rested and eaten a good meal, then he put everyone to work making light packs of dry driftwood.

"We've got a job of climbing to do," he explained.

With Pete Savanoff carrying the heaviest load, they climbed to the point where Reagan had made his signal fire, then dumped the wood in three piles a quarter of a mile apart.

"No fires were to mean we didn't make it, naturally," Hank explained, "but I told Mary before I left that one fire at nine o'clock tonight indicated we had made it, two that you were alive, Mr. Reagan, and three that you are alive and the silver-blues are on the island. Four fires will indicate that one or more of us will start for Dismal Island the following morning."

"I'm afraid you'll never light four fires," Reagan said, as they watched the three fires burn.

Hank wasn't so sure. He was becoming intensely practical, now that he had thought things over. Agen and his men would stop at nothing, for if they were overpowered it meant facing murder charges. One man with a gun could do a lot if he got the upper hand, and yet, Hank argued, why take those odds and lose a fortune and perhaps a life, when there might be a better way out?

The three signal fires burned five minutes before a single answering fire appeared on Dismal Island.

"Put these fires out," Hank directed them. "No need of wasting wood. Besides if Bull Agen's men saw a fire up here they'd sure start wondering."

"Agen's men might spot the fires if his schooner was about," Reagan said bitterly, "but nobody else is likely to. We nearly broke our backs packing wood up here for signal fires the first months we were on the island. No ship ever answered."

The following day, when Hank had rested up, Reagan questioned him again. "What arrangements did you make with Mary about getting us off?"

"I told her to sit tight and say nothing if Agen returned to Dismal Island, which I don't think he will," answered Hank. "I said it might take a week, or months, but that with the help of whoever was on the island, we'd get off. That's the way we left it."

"About the only way you could leave it," Reagan agreed. He opened up a fur cache, showing Hank pelts taken the previous winter. Each was prime and in fine condition.

"Bull Agen doesn't know we've taken this many," explained Reagan. "He thinks we've got only a few."

"What are these worth?"

"To start a fad in fur, they're worth a hundred thousand," Reagan answered.

Hank removed the bidarkas from the outrigger-gear, and carried one to shallow water. "Pete," he said, "give me a hand here. I'm going to learn to handle this thing."

Pete protested, much to Hank's surprise, but in the end meekly obeyed orders. Standing almost hip-deep in the water, he kept the craft upright while Hank paddled.

The lessons continued day after day until Hank caught onto the trick of righting the craft with paddle strokes whenever it turned over. With a double paddle, dipping first on one side, then on the other, he made good time.

"I know you're thinking of paddling back to Dismal Island," Reagan said. "But, boy, don't try it. I think we'll have a better chance getting the jump on Agen. But if you do make it through, then what? Call the Coast Guard, I suppose, and have it rescue us?"

"The Coast Guard might get through with one of their power, self-bailing lifeboats," Hank admitted, "but, chances are, Agen would light out for Siberia and stay there. We want him locked up, don't we?"

"Hanged is the word," Reagan said savagely. "He's as important to me as the pelts. Lafe Clapp was one of my best friends." He seemed about to say something else, then changed his mind.

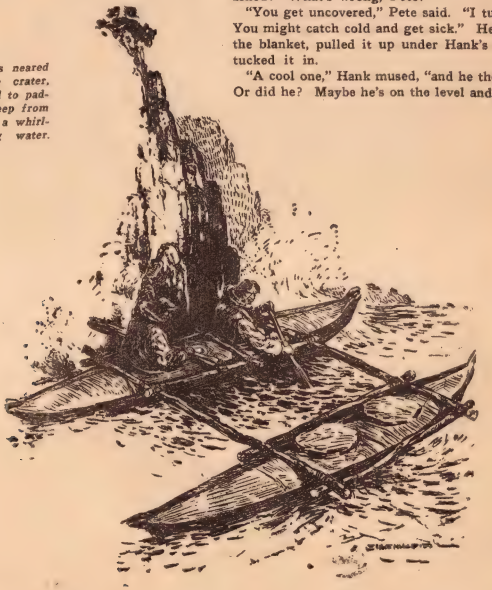
"Out with it," Hank urged, sensing the man's uncertainty.

"Pete worries me, Hank," Reagan said. "Before his head injury I would have trusted him to the limit. Now he's a changed man—an uncertain quantity when we start figuring defense or ways of

escaping. I don't like the way he stalks you. That's the word—stalks. He reminds me of a wild animal on the trail of something. Alert, yet cautious. He never lets you out of his sight."

"So you've noticed it, too?" Hank said. "But I think he's all right. We've never had any misunderstandings. And Mary told him he was to obey me in all things."

"When he doesn't remember me, how could he remember Mary?"



When the bidarkas neared the break in the crater, Hank and Pete had to paddle furiously to keep from being sucked into a whirlpool of churning water.

"He doesn't," Hank replied. "But she knew he was one of your men and naturally went north when they brought him to the hospital to recover from exposure and malnutrition. She looked after him and he seems to consider her his best friend."

"Well, I wish she were here to handle him," Reagan declared. "Anyway, watch your step."

Hank slept lightly after that. Several times he awakened to find Pete leaning on his elbow, gazing at him through the gloom. As Hank neared the end of the training period, and tested his skill with the bidarka in bad water, Pete's watchfulness increased.

Hank awakened one night feeling hot breath on his face and a big hand creeping slowly over his chest. Through half-opened eyes, he saw Pete's face inches away. His first impulse was to grasp the Aleut and yell for help, because he knew in a rough and tumble fight there wasn't one man in a hundred thousand who could handle Pete alone. Then he had a better hunch. Opening his eyes, he asked: "What's wrong, Pete?"

"You get uncovered," Pete said. "I tuck you in. You might catch cold and get sick." He smoothed the blanket, pulled it up under Hank's chin, then tucked it in.

"A cool one," Hank mused, "and he thought fast. Or did he? Maybe he's on the level and really did find me uncovered." Of one thing he was certain—if Pete had intended silently to throttle him, he had missed his chance.

Several days before Hank was ready to make an attempt to return, Reagan had a serious talk with him.

"It's about Pete, again," Reagan explained. "He just realizes, or pretends to realize, that he didn't know you planned to leave when you took up

bidarkaing seriously. He insists that you must be stopped."

"Why doesn't he ask me to stop, then?" Hank suggested.

"I asked him that, and he said it wouldn't do any good," Reagan replied. "He insists you wouldn't have a chance out there, and says that he doesn't think even he could get through."

Hank thought it over and concluded that Pete might get tough in the matter. If a fight followed someone would get hurt, and Hank couldn't afford to have his forces reduced. In particular, he needed Pete's tremendous strength when trouble developed.

The night before Hank left, Reagan slipped quietly away and lighted signal fires. Hank and the others kept Pete inside where he couldn't see the signals.

At five in the morning, Hank picked up a lunch he had cached the night before, got quietly into the bidarka and shoved off. The tide was with him and he paddled slowly toward the break in the wall. He made his way to a rock, got out and ate his lunch, watching the tide.

The tide had spent its initial force, which meant the water between the islands wouldn't be as turbulent. Hank got into the bidarka, pulled the waterproof parka tightly around the hatch rim and lashed it securely. He checked on the hood, so that if his head went under there wouldn't be leakage at that point.

The bidarka drifted along swiftly, needing only an occasional stroke to keep it headed right. Hank thought of the days when there were thousands of Aleuts and fleets of bidarkas must have gone to sea hunting seal, sea otter and whales. It must have been a stirring sight. Now that he could really handle one of the light craft he appreciated its worth.

Water boiled through the break in the wall and almost turned the bidarka over. Then Hank was clear of Crater Island, and the frothing sea lay ahead of him. The water was very blue this morning, and the island beyond a deep green, glistening from a recent rain. The bidarka bounced through a tide rip and water raced across the skin deck. A wave picked the light craft up, carried it along a hundred yards, then broke. Hank found himself upside down, looking at white water. He righted himself, drew in a deep breath and was turned over again. He paddled furiously, got halfway up and was beaten down again.

Something struck him violently on the head. Fighting off unconsciousness, he righted the skin boat again. Debris had gathered at the spot and his head had struck a bit of driftwood. He saw planks with heavy spikes protruding and turned the craft away. Driving the paddle deep, he drew clear, bit by bit. As a wave higher than the others lifted him, he caught a glimpse of Pete Savanoff following him.

"What's he up to?" Hank wondered. "Maybe he has some idea of tucking me in again."

The Aleut made no effort to close in. As soon as he was within a hundred yards of Hank's boat, he slowed down, and wherever Hank went he followed. There were times when both craft were upside down in the turbulent sea, but Pete always came up first, to look swiftly about until he located Hank.

Two hours out from Crater Island, Hank saw the umiak coming toward him. He waved it back with the paddle, fearing the motor might go dead and the occupants get into trouble.

Mary was standing in the bow as Hank pulled up alongside. "I've been worried sick," she shouted. "It seemed as if you were upside down half the time."

"There were moments when I thought it might be easier just to stay that way and keep paddling," Hank answered. "Your father is in fine condition, and so are the foxes. That's the first news you'll want to hear."

Sverdrup and the girl helped him aboard, then lifted the bidarka into the umiak.

"Now catch your breath!" Mary ordered. "I'll help Pete aboard." Then she looked up, exclaiming: "Well, of all things! Pete is turning back."

"Stop him," Hank yelled. "Even he can't go through that again without a long rest. The tide's turning and he'll hit the worst of it a mile from the entrance."

Mary called repeatedly but the Aleut continued paddling.

"Let me try," Sverdrup suggested. He cupped his hands to the mouth and bellowed: "Come back here, Pete."

To Hank's surprise, Pete meekly obeyed.

While Sverdrup looked after the motor and Pete did the steering, Hank sat in the bow with Mary, telling her of what had happened to date.

"I learned that bidarkas could make it through," he concluded, "and I also learned something of the tides and reefs. I concluded it would be good business if I came back, made changes in the umiak, took it to Crater Island, picked up the fur and brought it over here where it can be cached or sent out on the first passing boat. Anything to get it beyond reach of Bull Agen. A hundred thousand dollars' worth of pelts isn't lettuce, you know."

"And you risked your neck to make sure of the fur already taken?" she asked.

"Why not? That was part of the agreement," he said.

There was none of her old hardness in the tremulous smile she gave him. "You fool, to take such a chance. You blessed—fool." Then she told him

something she hadn't mentioned before. "You see, I'm young, and if we didn't get a dime for the fur, it wouldn't really matter. I could find something to do. Naturally I wanted to learn dad's fate, but there was something else. He's an old softy, thank heavens, and has a pension list as long as your arm —people who worked for him and gave him their best when he needed it. I couldn't let them down."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you're too much like dad," she explained. "I decided you'd have his ideas on pensioners, too. You might try too hard to clear up the mystery and locate the furs and take too many chances. Whereas, if you felt it just was a business proposition, you'd handle it the right way." She smiled again. "I can tell you this now, Hank, because I don't see how it is possible for you to take greater risks than you've already taken."

Hank put his crew of three to work making a canvas covering for the umiak. Holes were left and hatches made in order that the four could paddle the umiak if necessary. One hole, near the stern, was larger, so the man at that point could operate the engine, and steer.

Amidships, Hank built another hatch, through which the second outboard motor could be lowered. They made a trial spin on the bay with amazing results. The skin boat could be easily lifted by two strong men. With half throttle it fairly took wings, and yet it could carry over a ton of freight.

Unless Hank's theory was all wrong, the umiak would now outperform Agen's *Blue Otter* in bad water. It had the power and was light. After checking on the tides, Hank loaded several cases of fuel aboard, and set off early one morning.

The amidships motor was set at three-quarter speed and let alone. When Hank struck the bad water, he used the stern motor to increase or decrease the speed. There were moments when he was at full throttle bucking a cross current or whirlpool, but when the seas pounded too hard, he cut down the speed and lessened the impact. Again and again he escaped bad spots with ease. Mary Reagan said little, but her eyes were wide with excitement. She liked the element of danger.

"Hank, you never could have cut corners if you hadn't made it in the bidarka. You know every reef by its first name," she declared.

"Why shouldn't I?" he grinned. "On the way back I was upside down looking at them half of the time."

The umiak slipped neatly through the break, bucked the current briefly, then turned into the inlet. Zeke Reagan heard it coming and ran to the water's edge.

"Hi-yah, Mary! Hi-yah!" he bellowed as he ran, and when he reached the water he waded in, lifted his daughter from the umiak, kissed her and set her ashore. "By golly, girl, but I'm glad to see you! You're looking fine. Say, where the devil is that umiak going?"

"I imagine Hank is trying to shut off the second motor," she said. Hank was under the canvas decking, his back and shoulders making bulges as he scrambled forward. The motor died and Pete Savanoff and Lars Sverdrup paddled the skin boat ashore.

Sverdrup shook hands with Reagan and didn't seem to be able to take his eyes off him.

"Lars," Mary said, "you don't have to look at dad that way. Can't you see he's O. K.?"

"I suppose he is," Sverdrup admitted. "He certainly looks it. But—he's always been a friend of mine, and I've worried over what had happened to him." He turned to Reagan again. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Don't give me another thought, Lars," Reagan said. "On the other hand, though, it's nice to have a man so loyal he worries. Hank, you're running the show. What's the next move?"

"Tides aren't safe for us to go back now," Hank answered, "but eleven o'clock tomorrow will be about right. I'll get the slack at the start, and by the time we're in the open sea the tide will be with us. But I don't think I can take all of you and the fur."

"Take the fur, Tom and George," Reagan suggested. "Then come back for Mary, Lars, Pete and me."

That was the way they left it.

When Hank shoved off the following morning, Tom Lacy took a seat beside him. He was a friendly man of about sixty years and had a direct way of looking into Hank's eyes when he talked.

"You've been so busy with Reagan and the others," he said, "I haven't had a chance to ask you some questions."

"Shoot," Hank invited.

"I've had plenty of chance to look back and think about things that happened on Dismal Island, and on the schooner when Bull Agen brought us to Crater Island," Tom said. "I arrived at the conclusion that Wong was the brains behind Agen and that the mate, Laube, was jealous of him. How did Wong get killed and who did it?"

Hank told him what he knew, concluding: "Wong had swiped my Mackinaw and was mistaken for me."

"Wong had a thieving streak in him," commented Tom. "It would have been just like him to steal your Mackinaw. And if someone told Pete to get you, chances are, he'd do it. I've noticed he'll always do what the last person he encounters orders. Still, you can't get tough with a man like that. It isn't his fault. There's some little kink in his brain,

Straighten that out and he'll be himself again."

"Pete has had me worried several times, but he's never lifted a hand against me that I know of," Hank said. "Well, here we are at the break. Hang on. We'll slide between the walls and hit the open sea. It's just about slack water."

As Hank rounded the turn, Tom Lacy shouted and pointed. Bull Agen's schooner was just entering the channel from the sea. It, too, had taken advantage of slack water.

"What're you going to do?" Lacy yelled. "He'll run you down if you get near him."

Hank quickly sized up the situation. There was a chance he could pass the *Blue Otter* without a crash, and get into the turbulent water beyond before Agen could bring his schooner about. But the man would certainly open up with six-gun and rifle, and a few holes would sink the skin boat.

Turning the umiak about, Hank yelled at Tom to work his way under the canvas deck and open the throttle of the amidship motor. Some time had been lost in turning around. Now, with both motors turning over at top speed, the umiak really made time. But the schooner's crew had sighted the skin boat and it hadn't taken Agen long to recover from any surprise he might have felt at the meeting. The schooner was pursuing at full speed.

Confident that he could quickly overhaul the umiak, Agen made no attempt to open fire, but as the quarry widened the strip of water between them, three men appeared on the schooner's bow.

"They're going to cut loose with rifles," Lacy warned.

"Get out of sight," shouted Hank.

A bullet droned overhead and kicked up a jet of water ahead. Two others landed to the left. The next three bullets were closer. The raiders were getting the range. Hank crouched and looked at the spot where he turned into the inlet. If he got around a shoulder of lava rock, he could make a right-angled turn and be safe until he landed on the beach. Then he would toss the bales of fur ashore and tell everyone to grab a bale and race from the scene, while he tried to hold off the attack.

A bullet whistled past Hank's ear and he ducked. A strange thud came a second later.

"That one went through the skin," he yelled at Lacy.

"I'll see if I can find out what happened," Lacy answered. "Hello! Here it is! Water spurting through a hole in a steady stream." He stuffed a rag into the hole and partly checked the stream, but the speed of the umiak forced it out again.

Lacy felt as if they were between the devil and the deep blue sea—literally. If Hank slowed down, the bullets would find their mark oftener. He stuffed in another rag, then turned to a second hole. Before he could stop this new leak, there was a third and fourth. A stream of water began working along the bottom. Fortunately the built-in well prevented the water from reaching either motor. But the bales of fur were in danger. Tom yelled at Hank for orders.

"Put the fur and the rifles on top of the canvas deck where they can't get wet," Hank told him.

"The rifles are wet already," said Lacy. "They must have slipped and slid to the bottom. Fur's O. K." He pushed the bales up through the opening and spread them about so that the boat would ride on an even keel. He followed with the rifles.

"How about letting them have a dose of their own medicine?" he asked.

"I thought of that," Hank answered, "but it would be a waste of time. They're protected by bulwarks. If we can just keep afloat, we've got a chance."

He rounded the lava rock just as two more bullets ripped holes in the umiak. She began to yaw as the water sloshed back and forth. George Frater, who had remained silent, but ready to lend a hand from the start, now found enough water to make bailing worth while. He kept the tin bucket going constantly, but the water gained.

"We've got to do something, and do it quick!" Hank exclaimed.

VI.

Hank decided to gamble on the few minutes he would be out of sight of the pursuing craft. He put the umiak in close to shore and the two men tossed the baled fur into openings left when the lava cooled. A hundred thousand dollars' worth of fur, Hank reasoned, would be an arguing point if Agen got the upper hand. Next they pulled up the amidship motor and dropped it into a convenient hole. A minute later the other motor followed. Now they used paddles.

"Get your clothes off," Hank directed as the schooner rounded the point. "We're going to swim for it."

Drawing his knife, he ripped a hole in the bottom of the umiak. Water rushed in so rapidly the bow lifted. With clothing rolled into tight bundles and lashed, the three men leaped into the icy water. Hank climbed out first, turned and helped the other two. The umiak was just going under.

"I know a short cut from here," Lacy said, as they dressed. He led the way back to Zeke Reagan and the others. They had heard the shots, then the familiar purr of the schooner's powerful motor, and were on the beach.

"This is the showdown," Hank declared. "We've either got to beat them or be wiped out. If taking you people from Dismal Island wasn't piracy, firing on the umiak was, and Agen knows it."

"What do you want us to do?" asked Reagan.

"I want Mary, Lacy and you to scatter as you run to the interior of the island," Hank said. "You can get together later. I want to create the impression of panic. Then, with Pete, Lars and Frater, I'll try to get hold of the schooner."

Mary looked worried, but all she said was: "That *is* an ambition."

"See that point?" Hank indicated a curious lava formation towering above the tundra. "If we get control of the schooner we'll blow the air whistle three times. Everyone go to that point and I think we can take you aboard."

Hank could see admiration in Mary's eyes, but he knew she doubted the success of an attempt he hoped would succeed through sheer audacity.

They scattered up the little valley back of the beach, as the schooner dropped anchor close to the shore. A lone rifleman sent shots after them, but the range was too great. Hank, hoping to trick Agen into thinking they were all unarmed, had given orders not to return the fire. Besides, what arms they possessed had been soaked in salt water and the mechanism might jam if they attempted to use them.

A mile up the valley, Hank and his men scattered and climbed a ridge. Looking back, he could see that Agen and his men were puzzled over the move. Obviously, the schooner captain was reasoning, he must divide his force to pursue each man. This he didn't want to do, if Hank's surmise was correct. Indecision held Agen for several minutes; then, leaving their beached boat, the schooner crew broke into two parties. The three with Agen followed Hank; the other four took up Reagan's trail.

As soon as they were over the ridge, Hank's men joined him. They broke into a trot, following the ridge, but keeping immediately below the crest. Occasionally Hank took careful observations to check the general situation. Reagan, Mary and Lacy were keeping well ahead of their pursuers. The sailors, wearing rubber boots, would soon get leg-weary and slow up.

The ridge became a sheer wall overlooking the inlet and Hank stopped. Immediately below they could see the shacks, barabaras and beach. A small boat was pulled up on the shore.

"That boat is inviting," Frater said. "All we have to do is take it."

"Could you shove it into the water alone?"

"Yes, with a little grunting," Frater replied.

"That will be your job, then," Hank said. "Here's the play: The tide is still running in, which leaves the stern of the schooner headed toward the beach. Beyond that is the small boat. If we attempted to take it, someone aboard would spot us and open up with a rifle. My plan is for Lars, Pete and me to go up to the point where we cached the motors. We'll strip off, let the current carry us to the schooner's bow and climb up the anchor chain."

"Water's cold," Frater warned. "You might be too numb to fight."

"The Japan Current flows along here," Hank argued. "And when I came out of the water before, I wasn't too numb to climb up. As soon as we have things in hand on deck, you break from cover, launch the boat and come out."

"I'll follow instructions to the letter," Frater said. "If I were younger and could stand a lot of cold water I'd make that swim with you."

Through all this Lars Sverdrup said nothing. Pete Savanoff listened and nodded. "Undress and give Frater your clothes," Hank directed.

"I hope there's a fire in the galley," Sverdrup said, shivering as he pulled off his shirt.

He gasped a little as he entered the water feet first. Hank would have preferred going in head-first, but the splash might attract attention. Each man picked up a little seaweed and covered his head and shoulders; then, paddling easily, they let the current carry them to the schooner's bow.

Hank got there first. He grasped the anchor chain and waited for the others. "Follow me, Pete," he said. "Knock every man cold that you see. They are all enemies. Understand?"

"Yes," the Aleut said, in his simple-minded way.

side. Their drenched bodies formed a pool of water on the deck. Picking up a belaying pin, Hank gave it to Sverdrup, who was the oldest and weakest of the three and needed more than fist power.

Then, slipping quickly into the forecastle, Hank searched the bunks for sleeping men, but there were none. The air was heavy and the bedding dirty. Agen's crew didn't go in for cleanliness, evidently.

The deck space from the forecastle to the cabins at the stern of the craft contained a dozen drums of fuel, the galley and a deckhouse.

Hank waved frantically with his paddle to warn the umiak away but Mary drove the little craft through the turbulent water with a reckless disregard for danger.

Hank began climbing, but Lars Sverdrup put his lips to Pete's ear. "This is my last order," he whispered, "and don't forget it."

Pete listened attentively and nodded, as he invariably did when Sverdrup told him to do something. Then he began climbing the anchor chain.

Hank found the climb a tough one. It stretched out at an angle, and sagged. The sag followed his body until he was climbing almost straight up. His feet kept slipping off the rusty links. He got a hand hold on a line and climbed until his eyes were level with the deck. Apparently it was clear.

Sails had been secured so long that smoke from the galley had blackened one of them. Bull Agen relied on fuel for getting around, and that cost money in this country.

Pete joined Hank, then Sverdrup came over the

The schooner was steered from a small house built on the stern of the ship. This was fronted with heavy glass, and commanded a view of everything. The boom, which carried the mainsail, just cleared it.

Voices came from this part of the vessel and as the three men were moving toward the door leading to the cabins, it suddenly opened and a burly individual, in greasy dungarees, looked at them in astonishment.

"Get him!" Hank commanded Pete.

As Pete leaped to obey, the man slammed the door and bolted it. They could hear his voice yelling: "Come here quick, boys. Something's gone wrong. Trimble's men are on the schooner."

"Get a gun!" another voice said.

"Gun, nothing," the first complained. "You know Agen don't leave guns around loose."

"Bust the door down, Pete," Hank ordered.

Pete stepped back a few feet, ran and hurled his weight against the heavy door. It splintered, but didn't open. The second attempt shattered the heavy oak panel.

Hank started to crawl through the opening, but Pete pulled him back and tossed him aside. "I go first," he said. He wasn't able to squeeze through, but that didn't stop him. He reached in and began tearing oak boards aside, bracing with his knees, then pulling. When the hole was large enough to admit his bulk, he stepped inside with Hank at his heels.

"Only room for two of us abreast in this passage," Hank said. "You follow me, Lars." There was no answer, and Hank, looking over his shoulders, noticed that Sverdrup was gone. There was no time to wonder what had become of him for the schooner's men were pouring into the cabin.

"Watch out for the big Aleut," one of them warned the others. "Don't let him get hold of you."

"I'll cool him off," the engineer said. He hurled a spanner and the heavy wrench sped like an arrow and struck Pete a glancing blow on the head. Hank ducked as it glanced from Pete's head to a timber above, then clattered to the deck.

Pete's knees sagged and a trickle of blood ran down his cheek. A deep animal cry of pain came from his lips. Half-sobbing, he staggered toward the schooner men. One of them, sensing that Pete was about to fall, leaped forward, measured the big Aleut, then drove his fist hard against the jaw. Pete swayed, and Hank, getting in front of him, feinted the attacker off balance and let drive with his own fist. He heard the sharp snapping of a bone, saw the man's head bounce back against his spine. Then the man dropped.

Others were swarming in, throwing whatever they could get their hands on, and usually missing because of haste. Hank retreated, found the spanner, then moved in, swinging it wildly. A half-dazed man fell to the deck, cleared his head, then wrapped his arms around Hank's leg and tried to pull him to the deck.

"That's it!" yelled another. "Hold him still, and we'll finish him. Everybody at once. This is hangin' if we're licked. Everybody at him!"

Hank went down under four men. He rolled over onto his back, got his knees up, and kicked backward, lifting an attacker from his feet and knocking him against the wall. With a crack on the jaw, he finished the man holding his leg; then he got up, hands clawing at him. Since he was naked from the waist up, the schooner men were having a hard time to hold him.

Things were beginning to blur from repeated blows and Hank was going down when he heard Sverdrup's voice yelling: "I'm coming, Hank!" A kettle of hot water passed over Hank's head and struck against the wall, splashing everyone. The room filled with steam, and howls came from half a dozen throats.

Hank got up and flattened an ear against the side of the first head he saw. Suddenly Pete Savanoff, too, was on his feet. He was roaring with fury and swinging wildly. One blow in ten connected, and when it did, the victim never moved again.

"Down below! Down below!" The engineer's voice sounded above the sound of bone against flesh, and the gasps of those who had gone down. The cabin magically cleared, and an iron door clanged shut. Pete hurled a man after the burly fellow who was belatedly retreating, and Hank, rushing in to secure the fellow, felt himself jerked about.

"Who the hell are you?" Pete roared. "Don't think you're going to get away." His face was contorted with fury. "Where's Zeke Reagan? You killed him, you dirty rat!"

"Hold on, Pete," Hank yelled, jerking clear. "I'm a friend. I'm Hank Trimble."

"You're no friend," Pete bellowed. He rushed in to get a hold, and Hank saw the same killer urge that had filled Pete's eyes when they attacked the trapped whales. Squaring off, Hank hit the Aleut with everything he had. The man's knees grew rubbery, but his bull strength held him up. He turned and yanked up a chair bolted to the deck, and hurled it at the smaller man.

Hank tried to ward off the blow, but there was too much momentum behind the flying chair. Things went black as he fell to the deck. Pete reached down to grasp Hank's ankles and smash his body against the nearest timber. Sverdrup grasped Pete's arms and shook him. "Pete! What have I told you? Again and again I've said: 'Pete, guard Hank Trimble with your life. Never let him take a foolish chance, even if you have to use force.' What's the matter with you? He's on our side. He's the boss."

"What're you talking about " Pete demanded. "I never saw him before. I know who our men are. He's a spy, or one of Agen's men. I'll kill him—"

"What's gone wrong with you, Pete?" Sverdrup shouted.

The Aleut looked around in bewilderment. "I don't know. How did we get on the schooner? We ought to be on the island. Lafe Capp is hurt. I just saw him with blood on his head. He's got Zeke Reagan's gun. Where's Zeke?"

"He's down below," Hank said thickly. He was half conscious from the effect of the blow, but he realized vaguely that they must harness Pete's power. "Come on, Pete."

"Follow him," Sverdrup directed. "He'll show you he's a friend."

Hank lurched to the ladder leading below decks.

He took one step, but lost his balance and pitched headlong below. Pete went down, picked Hank up and carried him to the deck above.

"Acts like he's broken his neck," Sverdrup said. There wasn't time to care for the injured. "Here, Pete, better take care of these beaten men before they revive enough to get ambitious."

He opened a small hatch and Pete dropped the men, one by one, into the damp darkness of the bilges. Sverdrup cupped his hands and yelled at Frater: "Get out here, quick. We've got our hands full."

Frater shoved the boat into the water and was soon alongside.

"What's up?" he asked as he climbed the ladder and came aboard.

"The rest are below," Sverdrup explained. "We've got to get them out."

"I'll get 'em out," Frater said. He returned to the boat, poured outboard-motor gasoline into the bailing tin, paddled the boat near an open porthole and tossed in gasoline. "I'll throw a match in there if you don't come out, with hands up," he threatened.

"The hell you will," a voice jeered. "You need this schooner to get away on. Throw in your match."

Frater shrugged his shoulders. "It didn't work," he said dejectedly to Sverdrup. "But I've got another idea."

"Yeah?" Sverdrup was dubious.

"Tell Pete to smash that hatch and get to them," Frater advised "They'll have no stomach for his stuff and here's what will happen. They'll work their way forward to a bulkhead door, with the idea of coming on deck amidships and jumping us from behind. We'll meet them."

It was a dangerous game to play, because they would be in a hold and fighting without the aid of either Pete or Hank, but the fight must be ended in their favor soon. If Agen noticed the boat was gone from the beach, he would become suspicious.

Sverdrup gave the order; then the two, picking up iron belaying pins, pulled off a hatch and went below. Shifting the hatch into place, they took their place on either side of an iron door leading into the compartment occupied by the men. They could hear Pete's hammering away, and the men debating on defense.

"Let's take him on," one urged. "If we all pile into him at once with spanners—"

"He's got an iron bar or something," argued another. "One crack from it and a man will be shark bait. I'm for going into the next hold, climbing up the ladder and getting them from behind. Sverdrup and Frater will stand between us and Pete, but we can finish them in short order."

"He's right. Sverdrup and Frater are standing between them and Pete," Frater whispered.

"Here they come," Sverdrup whispered. "There'll be four. They'll have to come out single file. We'll let 'em all get out. I'll take the last man, you pop number three, then I'll jump number two, and you try to get the first fellow. One good, hard swipe at each is all the chance we'll get."

The men emerged, the toughest one in the lead. "There's a crack in the hatch covering," he said, "I can see a streak of light. No cussing if you fall over something. This has got to be done quiet. Hey, what was that?"

The impact of iron against skull interrupted his instructions. It came again. Then again! He whirled in time to see Frater's upraised arm. He tried to ward off the blow, but was too late. A moment later Pete broke into the room beyond.

"O. K., Pete, we got 'em," Sverdrup said. "Pick 'em up and drop 'em into the small hold with the others. Wait, Frater and I will search them first."

Pete waited until the job was done, then he tossed a man lightly over his shoulder and disappeared up the ladder. He made the four trips in a brief time. Then they carried Hank Trimble into the captain's cabin and put him to bed.

"He's a pretty sick man," Frater said. "What with Pete hitting him over the head with a chair, and then falling down a ladder, it's a wonder he's alive."

Sverdrup nodded. "Can't worry about him now. We're supposed to blow the whistle three times as a signal we've got control of the schooner."

"And take the schooner to that queer formation of lava towering above the tundra," Frater added.

"I think we'd better wait awhile," Sverdrup said. "Hank figured to shift the schooner out of sight before signaling. But I'm not sure the three of us can handle her."

"Wait an hour or two," Frater agreed.

Pete, who had been rubbing his numerous bruises and staring intently at the shore, said: "What place is this? I never saw it before?"

"Now, Pete," Sverdrup said, "listen to me and I'll explain something that will be hard for you to understand. But I've never deceived you, and in time the whole business will clear up. In the fight on Dismal Island a couple of years ago, you got clipped by a bullet—" And while Pete listened intently, Sverdrup explained what had happened.

"Hm-m-m," Pete said when the other concluded, "I've missed two years of my life. Two years of fun, maybe, and I don't know anything about it. I don't like it. And this fellow, Hank Trimble, I nearly killed him and he's our friend. He won't like me."

"He likes you plenty," Sverdrup assured him,

"And he'll understand when we tell him you're your normal self again."

Frater's attention had been diverted to the porthole in the captain's cabin. He said nothing, but found a pair of binoculars and gazed briefly.

"Mary Reagan is coming along the beach like she's been sent for," he said. "But she's the only one in sight."

"Take the boat ashore, in case Agen's bunch starts after her," Sverdrup said.

Frater did better than that. He launched a light skiff, rowed ashore, towing the larger boat after him. He beached this at the point where Agen had left it, then picked up the girl with the skiff.

"I became separated from the others," she explained breathlessly, "and so I climbed a high point to get my bearings. I saw the boat was tied up to the schooner, and knew one of you boys had taken it there. That meant you had beaten those aboard, so I hurried along the beach. Anyone hurt?"

"Yes," Frater answered, "Hank Trimble is in bad shape."

"Oh!" She struggled for composure, and he saw pain fill her eyes. "Is . . . is it serious?"

"I don't know. Mary, I'm right sorry I broke the news to you so bluntly, but I didn't know. . . well, it didn't seem to me you two had any time for sparking, as the feller says."

"There hasn't been time," she said wanly, "but . . . well, I'm worried."

A few minutes later she scrambled up the ladder, while Frater secured the skiff.

Pete helped the girl over the side. "I'm myself," he announced. "I lost around two years of my life."

"I'm so glad," she said, then hurried to Hank. Running her hands gently over his head, she found a badly swollen spot. She touched it lightly with her fingers and wondered if the skull had been fractured. The scalp itself wasn't broken, and there didn't seem to be any considerable amount of blood gathering underneath.

Mary bathed Hank's head in cold water and tried to make him comfortable. After a long time he said uncertainly: "So it isn't a dream? Thought I was out of my head—or something."

"Hank?"

Something in her voice penetrated the fog pressing in about him, and he opened his eyes. "Funny," he thought. Mary's eyes and lips had lost the hardness he had noticed when he first saw her. "She's different." He closed his eyes again, because it was too much trouble to keep them open. Ten minutes passed and he felt stronger. He sat up with Mary's help, and took a drink of whiskey. "Elegant stuff," he said. "Agen buys good liquor. What's the setup now?"

"Pete is sorry he hit you with a chair," she said, then explained the change in the Aleut, thinking Hank might have forgotten.

"I thought as much. To get him to attack, I told him your father was below. The last I remember is starting down the ladder and slipping."

Mary brought in Pete, who shook hands, expressed regret and promised eternal friendship. Hank grinned.

"Everything is straightened out now," he said. "Keep watch for Agen. When he shows up, let me know."

"He'll do nothing of the kind," Mary said. "You're a casualty."

"The job isn't done," declared Hank. When Mary left, he had Frater bring his wool shirt, water-proof pants and shoes. He put them on and got back into the bunk again.

"I think Mary's going to get tough," he told Frater. "Tip me off when the time comes."

VII.

Frater put on the cook's clothing and moved about on deck, keeping an eye on the beach and smoke rolling from the galley stovepipe. The others remained out of sight.

An hour passed and twilight was descending before Agen and his men returned to the boat. It was evident Agen was in a vile mood, and he was cursing his men, including the mate, because something had gone wrong in launching the boat.

In Hank's absence Sverdrup was in charge. "They'll come up under the boat falls," he said. "Hook on, then all hands will haul away on the boat falls and pull the boat up. When it comes even with the deck, we'll jump 'em. Get their guns if you can. If not, try to dump the men overboard. With Hank out of it, they'll have the edge in numbers, but we'll have Pete Savanoff and surprise on our side."

They crouched as the boat came alongside and bumped the schooner. It came halfway up, paused, then the men hauled away again and it lifted three feet. There was another pause, followed by a sudden rush. It was evident that Agen had been warned. A six-gun blazed in Agen's hand and a bullet missed Sverdrup's head by inches.

Pete snatched a rifle from the mate's hand and swung it. The stock caught the mate on the shoulder and turned him end over end. Pete picked him up, held him high above his head, then hurled him at the men coming from the boat. Three of them crashed to the bottom.

Sverdrup, Frater and Pete stood shoulder to shoulder dishing out punishment, but taking more. Mary ran about the deck, snatching up belaying pins and hurling them at the enemy. One pin

bounced off a sailor's head and he settled like a damp rag.

"I'll turn the others loose," Agen said.

"Yes, you will!" Mary panted. She was three feet above his shoulders, but she hurled herself at him, and the two crashed to the deck. An experienced rough-and-tumble fighter, Agen had all the advantage. He jolted the girl to sleep with a left hook, then ran into his cabin.

Hank Trimble was just coming to lend a hand and met Agen at the door. Because Hank was still dizzy when he stood up, he dragged Agen to the deck, and the two men locked in a finish fight.

Mary, on her hands and knees, tried to reach the door, but her rubbery legs refused to support her.

"Quick, somebody," she cried in a frightened voice. "Agen is fighting Hank."

The others were having their hands full. Sverdrup half-turned and said: "I wanted Agen myself. I've waited a long time for a crack at the buzzard, but I can't stop now." Hank was in no shape for a long fight, but if he could keep the schooner captain busy for a minute or two it might turn the tide in their favor.

While Mary tried to reach the door, Sverdrup, Frater and Pete slugged it out with the others. One man caught Pete's fist flush on the chin. It lifted him clear of the deck and he fell backward into the sea. Pete grasped the next man and threw him overboard.

Now they were on equal terms, and presently the last of the schooner men was down. "Throw 'em overboard," Sverdrup ordered, upending a groggy man. "Fast, now! That's it. Now come, Pete. Agen must have turned the others loose by now, and they'll be swarming all over us."

"He's in the cabin," Mary wailed. "I haven't heard a thing. He's killed Hank Trimble. He's—"

Pete, bleeding from several wounds, opened the door and looked down. "Finish fight," he said. He turned, lifted the groggy girl to her feet and supported her while she stared in amazement. Hank's legs were around Agen's neck, and slowly, surely, he was choking the man into submission. It was a toss-up which man's strength would give way first.

Mary checked the impulse to help Hank win. This strain might put him to bed for a week, but she knew he wanted victory, and wanted to attain it alone.

Agen's resistance ended suddenly, and his face, turning purple, revealed his fear.

"You've got him, Hank," Sverdrup said. "Tie him up, Pete. Then help me get those others out of the water before they drown."

One by one, the beaten men were hauled aboard, given dry clothing and locked below, with the exception of Bull Agen and the mate, Laube.

Laube waited until Hank was able to discuss the whole setup, then he said: "I'd like to tell you a few things."

"Reagan and Tom Lacy are on the beach," Hank told him. "Wait until we get them aboard. They'll want to be in on this."

Lacy took over the galley and cooked a meal for his own crowd and a mulligan for the prisoners. Afterward, they gathered in the skipper's cabin and Hank said: "O. K., Laube, let's hear what you have to say."

"I was against this business from the first," the mate said, "but Agen overruled me. He always said we could run to Siberia if anything went wrong. Well—here we are. I should have left the schooner, but I hold a quarter interest and that held me."

"Who killed Lafe Capp?" Reagan asked.

"I don't know," answered Laube. "There was quite a little shooting going on at the time. I saw Lafe go down as he was reloading his six-gun. Later, I saw him wandering over the tundra. I never fired a shot at anyone, but I used my fists. I've only killed one man since we've been mixed up in this business."

"Who was that?" Reagan asked quickly.

"Wong!"

"Wong?" Hank exclaimed.

"Yes, it came about this way. Sverdrup pretended to be friendly to Agen. Wong figured that Sverdrup was loyal to Reagan and was out for revenge. Agen wasn't sure, but he played along with Sverdrup.

"That's right," Sverdrup said. "He wanted me to get Hank, or have Pete do it. I let him think I'd do it. I was afraid he'd give the job to someone else, if I didn't seem to agree to handle it."

"Agen wasn't sure, so he gave Wong orders to get Hank, and I was on my way to warn Hank when we tangled. It was a life and death affair," Laube said, "and I—was the lucky one."

"How did my Mackinaw get on Wong's back?" Hank asked.

"He took a liking for it," Laube said, "and when I saw it where you had left it, I put the Mackinaw on him. After all, I had to turn any possible suspicion from my way. I knew Agen thought Pete might be assigned the job, and he would conclude it was a case of mistaken identity."

"I believe him," Reagan said. "I got sick on the island and Agen took me off to doctor me. Laube was always decent to me. Hank, do you remember the day the schooner came out of the fog and almost ran down the *Esther?*"

Hank nodded. "I saw your face at a porthole. Naturally I didn't recognize you."

"I dropped a note in a bottle," Reagan said. "Well, Laube knew I had an empty bottle, pencil and paper, and he left the porthole window loose, so I could get it open."

"That's right," Laube said dejectedly. "All of which won't keep me out of the pen."

"When you get out, look me up," Reagan told him. "I'll help you get a new start."

When Pete gave Agen his breakfast the following morning, the schooner captain said: "Get Trimble in here. I want to make a deal."

Hank came in and Agen glared at him. "Your umiak is sunk," he said brusquely, "and I'm the only living man who can take this schooner out of here to safe waters."

"The umiak can be raised," Hank told him. "I sent it down in shallow water—an ace up my sleeve, if I need it."

"I don't know about that," Agen growled. "Here's the deal: Turn me and my men loose, and I'll agree to take you all out and give you the schooner. You can use it and I'm through."

The schooner would make the fox-raising setup complete. With it they could take care of both islands, and freight supplies to other places on the side. Hank realized the possibilities, but he shook his head. "No dice, Agen," he said. "You'd have killed us all if you had the chance. This is Uncle Sam's deal from here on."

"Who's going to take the schooner out?"

"I'm going to try it. I certainly learned the location of the bad rocks and the tricks of the tide the hard way.

"You'll crash her. The engineer won't keep the motor turning over," Agen threatened.

"I think he will," declared Hank. "Life is still sweet to him."

He had spoken with confidence, but he felt none too easy when he took the wheel and rang the bell. This, again, was where a mistake in judgment might prove serious. He spent two hours moving up and down the channel getting the feel of the schooner; then, the tide being right, he headed through the break in the wall. The bales of silver-blue pelts had been picked up and stowed in a safe spot aboard.

Sverdrup, Reagan and Mary were in the little wheelhouse with Hank.

"I agreed that Lars and Hank should have fifteen percent each," Mary told her father. Hank looked at her reflectively, thinking how completely feminine and appealing she looked now that responsibility had been lifted from her shoulders.

"You made a bargain at that," Reagan declared. "As soon as we can arrive at a fair valuation, we'll pay off."

"I'll put my share into the business," Sverdrup said. "I see quite a future in the two islands. The government will confiscate the schooner for engaging in piracy, and we can buy it at the auction. But I'm only speaking for myself of course. What about you, Hank?"

Hank rang for full speed ahead and felt the drive as the motor fought the currents to a standstill, then beat them. Ahead was open water, and beyond that, a Coast Guard cutter that would gladly take their prisoners in charge. But Hank's gaze was fixed on scenes months and years ahead. His eyes on Mary, he said: "Young man with experience in fur business would like to invest his fifteen percent of a payoff in a permanent proposition. Would prefer a location west of West. Apply to Hank Trimble, wheelhouse, schooner *Blue Otter*."

Sverdrup nudged Reagan. "Come on, Zeke," he said, "let's take a walk on deck. I know of a young lady who is about to answer an advertisement."

THE END.

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4 THINGS TO DO

to keep prices down and help avoid another depression

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